

fantasy

FEBRUARY, 1953

Volume 1, Number 1

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FANTASY MAGAZINE is published bi-monthly by Future Publications, Inc., 175 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y. All stories in this issue are new and have not previously been published. No actual persons are designated in works of fiction, either by name or character; any similarity is coincidental. Copyright 1953 by Future Publications, Inc. All rights, including translation reserved. Entry as second-class matter applied for at the Post Office, at New York, N. Y. Subscriptions \$2.00 per year in the United States and Possessions; \$2.50 per year in Canada; \$3.00 elsewhere. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts or art work. All submissions must include return postage to expedite the return of manuscripts not acceptable.

\$2.00 per year in U. S. A.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

173

85¢ per copy





THE BLACK STRANGER

BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

Edited by L. Sprague de Camp

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

In the lands of the Picts, Conan the Cimmerian finds black sorcery and a road that leads toward the throne of Aquilonia. A hitherto-unpublished story of the legendary Hyperborean Age by the master of all fantasy-adventure writers.

Count Valenso of Korzetta lay in his bed, sleeping, while around him, the log walls of the manor-house he had built seemed proof against all the Pictish wilderness

outside. He should have slept in the peace of his hard-earned security. But now he moaned and tossed wildly. His eyes opened stiffly in the darkness, his mouth fought for the breath that rasped harshly in his throat, and his head turned toward a corner of the room where the darkness seemed thicker than elsewhere.

The sleep still lay heavy on Valenso, yet his eyes carried their message to his tortured brain. The pupils grew wide, and the breath caught and grew in his chest, to burst and rush out in a scream that seemed to con-tort his whole body.

"The black man!"

Then he lay limp, with damp sweat oozing from each pore of his skin. In the darkness, a bluish glow seemed to flicker, and the shadows gathered together and flowed toward the stout oaken door, and then through it. There was the faint sound of a ghastly chuckle left behind. Even in his swoon, Count Valenso seemed to hear it and he moaned and began writhing again.

I

The Painted Ones

One moment the glade lay empty; the next, a man stood poised warily on the edge of the bushes. Though there had been

no sound to warn the gray squirrels of his coming, the gay-hued birds that flitted about the open space now rose in a clamoring cloud. The man scowled back the way he had come, as if fearing that the birds' flight had betrayed him. Then he stalked across the glade, placing his feet with care.

Despite his gigantic size and muscular build he moved with the subtle certitude of a leopard. He was completely naked and carried no tool or weapon but a crude knife with a wooden handle and a blade of hammered copper. His limbs were criss-crossed with briar-scratches and caked with dried mud. Beneath the scratches and dirt he was marked from head to foot by old scars—scores of them. The scab of a fresh wound clung to his thickly-muscled left arm and another to his right leg. Under his matted black mane his scarred, swarthy face, shadowed by a week's growth of sparse black beard, was drawn and gaunt, and his eyes burned like those of a wounded wolf. He limped along the faint path across the open space.

Such was Conan of Cimmeria, barbarian, adventurer, thief, pirate, mercenary, warrior, lately General of the Bossonian March under his Maggot-pated Majesty, Nemedides of Aquilonia; and

now, by another turn of fate's wheel, a wounded and destitute fugitive from the jealousy of King Nemedides and the implacable hatred of the wild Picts whom, short weeks before, he had driven in mad flight from the Aquilonian frontier.

Halfway across the glade he stopped and whirled catlike as a long-drawn call quavered out across the forest. The Cimmerian knew that this was not, as one less accustomed to the wilderness might have thought, the howl of a wolf.

Rage burned redly in his blood-shot eyes as he turned once more and hurried along the path which, as it left the glade, ran along the edge of a dense thicket among the trees. A massive log, embedded in the earth, paralleled the fringe of the thicket, lying between it and the path. Conan looked at the log and back across the glade. To his wilderness-sharpened eyes there was evidence, however faint, of his passage, and therefore visible to the equally keen eyes of those who pursued him.

He walked with deliberate carelessness down the trail, here and there crushing a grass-blade. At the farther end of the great log he sprang upon it and ran lightly back along it. As the bark had long been worn away by the elements, he left no sign to show

that he had doubled on his trail. When he came opposite the densest part of the thicket he faded into it like a shadow.

The minutes dragged. Then three more men appeared at the eastern edge of the clearing: short, dark-skinned, heavily-muscled, in beaded buckskin loin-cloths, with an eagle's feather thrust through each black top-knot. Their bodies were painted in intricate designs, and they were heavily armed with crude weapons of hammered copper.

They moved slowly across the glade in single file, bending down to stare at the path. One of them stiffened, grunted, and pointed with his broad-bladed stabbing-spear at some crushed grass-blades where the path entered the forest again. All halted instantly, their beady black eyes questing the forest walls. Seeing nothing to awaken suspicion, they presently moved on, more rapidly now.

They had just passed the spot where the thicket crowded closest to the old trail when the Cimmerian bounded into the path behind them and plunged his knife between the shoulders of the last man. The Pict fell forward, dying, before he knew what had struck him.

The other two whirled with the steel-trap quickness of savages,

but even as Conan wrenched the knife out of his first victim's back he struck a tremendous blow with his fist at the next one. The Pict was just turning as the fist smote the side of his head like a maul and hurled him half-stunned into the bushes.

The remaining Pict, a chief by the scarlet tip of his eagle-feather, came savagely in to the attack. He was stabbing at the Cimmerian's breast even as the latter straightened up, holding in his left hand the ax that the first Pict had dropped as he fell. As the spear-head flashed redly out, Conan knocked it aside with the hatchet, and the knife in his right hand ripped upward into the painted belly.

A howl of fury and pain burst from the disemboweled Pict's lips as he crumpled. A wild chorus of yells from east of the glade answered it. Conan wheeled, crouching, shaking the sweat from his face. Blood trickled down his forearm from his reopened wound.

With a gasping, incoherent imprecation he turned and fled westward. He did not pick his way now, but ran with all the speed of his long legs, calling upon his deep reserves of endurance. Behind him for a space the woods were silent. Then a demoniac howling burst out, and he knew his pursuers had found the

bodies. He had no breath for cursing the drops of blood that fell to the ground from his arm-wound, leaving a trail a child could follow.

It would be futile to leave the trail for the tangled depths on either hand. Conan ran on while the blood pounded louder and louder in his ears and each breath was a racking, dry-mouthed gulp. Behind, a mad baying broke out, token that the Picts were close upon his heels and expected to overhaul their prey swiftly.

Abruptly he burst from the densest of the trees and saw, ahead of him, the face of a cliff that rose almost straight from the ground without any intermediate slope. Glances to right and left showed that he faced a solitary dome or crag of rock that rose like a tower from the depths of the forest. As a boy Conan had scaled the steep hills of his native Cimmeria but, while he might have attempted the near side of this crag had he been in prime condition, he knew that he would have little chance with it in his present wounded and weakened state. By the time he had struggled up twenty or thirty feet the Picts would be bursting from the woods to fill him with arrows.

But perhaps the crag's other

faces would prove less inhospitable. The trail curved around the crag to the right. He followed it and found that at the west side of the crag it wound up rocky ledges between jagged boulders, to a broad ledge near the summit.

That ledge would be as good a place to die as any. Conan limped up the trail, the world swimming in a dizzy red mist before him. In the steeper places he went on hands and knees, holding the haft of his hatchet between his teeth.

He had not yet reached the jutting ledge when some forty painted savages raced around from the far side of the crag, howling. At the sight of their prey their screams rose to a fearful crescendo, and they ran to the foot of the crag, loosing arrows as they ran. The shafts showered about the climbing Cimmerian and one stuck in the calf of his leg. Without pausing in his climb he tore out the sharpened stone point and threw the arrow aside, heedless of the less accurate missiles that cracked against the rocks about him. Grimly he hauled himself over the ledge and turned about. He lay glaring down at his pursuers over the rim, only his hair and eyes visible. His chest heaved as he drank in the air with great laboring, shuddering gasps.

A few more arrows whistled up as the warriors came on yelping, leaping over the rocks at the foot of the hill. The first to reach the steep part of the crag was a brawny brave, another chief from his scarlet-stained feather. He halted briefly, one foot on the sloping trail, arrow nocked and half drawn. But the shaft was never loosed. He froze as the blood-lust in his black eyes gave way to startled recognition. Then he turned with a whoop, throwing his arms wide to check the rush of the howling braves. Though Conan understood the Pictish tongue, he was too far away to catch the staccato phrases snapped out by the red-feathered chief.

They all ceased yelping and stood mutely staring up—not, it seemed to the Cimmerian, at him, but at the hill itself. Then they unstrung their bows, turned their backs, and trotted back along the trail by which they had come, to disappear around the curve of the cliff without a backward look.

Conan stared in amazement. He knew that they had gone for good heading for their villages a hundred miles to the east. But why? Why should they abandon a chase that they had followed so long and wolfishly when they had finally cornered their prey? True,

the different tribes had sanctuaries in which a fugitive of their own tribe might be safe from his fellow-tribesmen. But the different tribes seldom respected each other's sanctuaries, and the men who had pursued him certainly maintained no sacred spots hereabouts. They were men of the Eagle and lived far to the east of this country of the Wolf-Picts, having originally captured Conan when he had plunged into the wilderness in his flight from Aquilonia.

He shook his head, uncomprehending, and rose dizzily. His limbs were stiff and his wounds ached. He spat dryly, rubbing his reddened eyes with the back of his thick wrist, blinked, and took stock of his surroundings. Below him the green wilderness waved and billowed away to westward, and above the horizon rose a steel-blue haze which hung over the ocean. The wind stirred his black mane as the salt tang of the atmosphere revived him. He expanded his huge chest and drank it in.

He turned stiffly and painfully, growling at the twinge in his bleeding calf, and investigated the ledge on which he stood. Behind it rose a sheer rocky cliff to the crest of the crag thirty feet above. A narrow ladder-like stair of hand-holds had been niched into the rock, and a few

feet from the foot of this ascent a cleft opened in the wall, big enough for a man to enter.

He limped to the cleft, peered in, and grunted. The sun, above the western forest, threw a shaft down the cleft, revealing a tunnel-like cavern with an arch at its end. In that arch, illuminated by the beam, was set a heavy iron-bound oaken door!

This was amazing. In this howling wilderness, the nearest outposts of civilization were the Aquilonian settlements hundreds of miles to the east; the western coast ran for two thousand miles, from the fertile valleys of Zingara to the cold plains of Vanahheim, bare and empty of human life save for the villages of the fierce sea-land tribes, even ruder than their forest-dwelling brethren. Yet that door was no Pictish work.

Suspiciously Conan approached it, knife and ax ready. As his bloodshot eyes became accustomed to the gloom on either side of the narrow shaft of sunlight he noticed something else. The tunnel widened out before it came to the door, and along the sides were ranged massive iron-bound chests. A blaze of comprehension came into his eyes. He bent over one, but the lid resisted his efforts. He lifted his hatchet to smash the ancient lock; then changed his mind and

limped toward the arched door. It swung inward to his push.

Conan recoiled with a startled curse, knife and hatchet flashing up to positions of defense. He stood poised, glaring through the door.

He was looking into a cave, darker than the tunnel, but meagerly illuminated by a dim glow that came from the great jewel that stood on a tiny ivory pedestal in the center of the great ebony table about which sat those silent shapes whose appearance had so startled the Cimmerian. These did not move, but the bluish mist that overhung the chamber seemed to move like a living thing.

"Well," said Conan harshly, "are you all drunk?"

There was no reply. Though not easily abashed, the Cimmerian felt disconcerted.

"You might offer me a glass of that wine you're swigging," he growled, his natural truculence aroused. "By Crom, you show scant courtesy to one of your own brotherhood. Will you—"

His voice trailed off, and in silence he stared at those bizarre figures.

"They're not drunk," he muttered. "They are not even drinking. What devil's game is this?"

He stepped across the threshold. Instantly the movement of

the blue mist quickened. The stuff flowed together and solidified, and Conan found himself facing a monster twice his size with huge black hands that darted instantly for his throat.

II

Men from the Sea

Dawn was now past, but the early sun had not yet dispelled the light pearly clouds that drifted over the waters to westward.

Belesa, niece of Count Valenso, lifted her finely-shaped head and stared out over a scene alien and repellant to her, yet drearily familiar in every detail. She was standing on the northern curve of a wide bay; south of her the land sloped up to the low ridge that formed one horn of that bay. From that ridge, she could look southward across the bare waters into infinities of distance as absolute as the view to the westward and northward.

Glancing listlessly landward, she scanned the fortress which had been her home for the past year and a half. Against the pearl-and-blue morning sky floated the golden and scarlet flag of Korzetta. But the red falcon on its golden field awakened no enthusiasm in her youthful bosom, though it had flown over many a bloody field in the far South. She

made out the figures of men toiling in the gardens and fields that huddled near the fort, seeming to shrink from the gloomy rampart of forest that fringed the wide clearing, from which, with fire and steel and infinite labor, her uncle's folk had stripped the stubborn oaks. To north and west the forest stretched as far as eye could see. Death lurked in those whispering depths, death slow and hideous, hidden, painted, tireless, unrelenting.

She sighed and moved toward the water's edge, with no set purpose in mind. The dragging days were all of one color, and the world of cities and courts and gaiety seemed thousands of miles and ages of time away. Again she sought in vain for the reason that had caused a Count of Zingara to flee with his retainers to this wild coast, hundreds of miles from the land that bore him, exchanging the castle of his ancestors for a hut of logs.

Belesa's eyes softened at the patter of small feet across the sands. A young girl came running over the sandy ridge, naked and dripping, with her flaxen hair plastered to her head. Her eyes were wide.

"Lady Belesa!" she cried, rendering Zingaran words with a soft Ophirian accent. "Oh, Lady Belesa! Look! I saw. . ."

Breathless, the child stammered and gestured. Belesa put an arm about her, not minding the dampness of the child's body against her dress. In her lonely life Belesa had bestowed the tenderness of an affectionate nature on the waif she had bought from a brutal master on the long voyage from the South.

"What are you trying to tell me, Tina? Get your breath, child!"

"A ship!" cried the girl, pointing southward. "I was swimming in a pool left by the tide and I saw it!"

She tugged timidly at Belesa's hand. Belesa felt her own heart beat faster at the thought of an unknown visitor. They had seen no sail since coming to that barren shore.

Tina flitted ahead of her over the yellow sands and up the ridge. At the top she halted, an ivory figure against the clearing sky, with an arm outstretched.

"Look, my lady!"

Belesa had already seen it—a billowing white sail, filled with the freshening south wind, beating up along the coast, a few miles from the point. Her heart skipped a beat, as she felt a premonition of strange and violent events. Surely this sail was not wafting up this lonely coast by chance! There as no harbor town known to the north, though

one sailed to the ultimate shores of ice, and the nearest port to the south must be nearly a thousand miles away. What brought this stranger to this lonely place her uncle had named Korvela Bay?

"Who can it be, my lady?" said Tina, pressing close. "Is it the man the Count fears?"

"Why do you say that? How do you know my uncle fears anyone?"

"He must," returned Tina naïvely, "or he would never have hidden in this lonely spot. Look how fast it comes!"

"We must tell my uncle," murmured Belesa. "The fishing-boats have not gone out yet, so none of the men has seen that sail. Get your clothes, Tina. Hasten!"

The child ran down the slope to the pool where she had been swimming, snatched up her slippers, tunic, and girdle, and skipped back up the ridge, hopping as she dressed on the run. Belesa caught her hand and hurried her toward the fort. A few minutes after they had entered the gate of the log palisade, the blare of a trumpet rang out over field and beach.

Every man outside the fort—the farmers in the gardens and the fishermen opening the boat-house doors—dropped what he was doing to run for the stockade. As the straggling lines con-

verged on the open gate, the running men glanced fearfully toward the dark line of woodland to the east; not one looked seaward.

They thronged through the gate, shouting questions at the sentries on the parapet. "What is it? Why are we called in? Are the Picts coming?"

One taciturn sergeant in worn leather and rusty steel pointed southward to where the sail was now visible from the parapet. Men began to climb up to stare over the pointed ends of the logs.

On a small lookout tower on the roof of the manor-house, which was built of logs like the other buildings in the enclosure, Count Valenso watched the sail as it rounded the point of the southern horn. The count was a lean, wiry man of medium height and late middle age; dark, and somber of expression. He was dressed in black, the only color about his costume being the jewels that twinkled on his sword-hilt and the wine-red cloak thrown over his shoulders. He twisted his thin black mustache and turned gloomy eyes on his seneschal, a leather-featured man in steel and satin.

"What make you of it, Galbro?"

"A carack, sir. A carack trimmed and rigged like a craft

of the Barachan pirates—look there!”

Cries below echoed his exclamation. The ship was slanting inward across the bay, and all saw the flag that suddenly broke forth from the masthead—a black flag with the outline of a scarlet hand.

“A Barachan, all right,” grunted Galbro. “And unless I’m mad, it’s Strombanni’s *Red Hand*. What does he want on this naked coast?”

“He can mean us no good,” growled the count. A glance below showed him that the massive gate had been closed and that the captain of his men-at-arms, gleaming in steel, was directing his men to their stations, massing most of his strength along the western wall which contained the gate.

A hundred men had followed Valenso into exile. Of these, forty were men-at-arms in helms and suits of mail, armed with swords, axes, and crossbows. The rest were peasants and artisans, armored only in shirts of toughened leather; but they were brawny toilers, skilled in the use of their hunting bows, woodsmen’s axes, and boar-spears. They took their places, scowling at their hereditary foes. For more than a century the pirates of the Barachan Isles, a tiny

archipelago off the southwestern coast of Zingara, had preyed upon the people of Zingara and the weak monarchy had been unable to put them down.

The man on the stockade stared somberly at the carack as it swung inshore, its gilt and brasswork flashing. They could see the figures swarming on the deck and hear the yells of the seamen. Steel twinkled along the rail.

The count had retired from the tower, shooing his niece and Tina before him. Having donned helmet and cuirass, he betook himself to the palisade. His subjects watched him with moody fatalism. Though they meant to sell their lives dearly, they had scant hope of victory. A year on that naked coast had shadowed their souls with a conviction of doom. Their women stood silently in the doorways of their huts and quieted the clamor of their children.

Belesa and Tina watched tensely from an upper window in the manor-house, and Belesa felt the child’s body quiver in the crook of her arm.

“They will drop anchor near the boathouse,” murmured Belesa. “There it goes! Do not tremble so, child! They cannot take the fort. Perhaps they were blown hither by a storm, and wish only for food and water.”

"They are coming ashore in the long-boat!" said the child. "Oh, my lady, I am afraid! Look how the sun strikes fire from their armor! And so many! Will they eat us?"

Belesa laughed despite her apprehension. "Of course not! Who put that idea into your head?"

"Zorgelitas told me the Barachans eat women."

"He was teasing you. The Barachans are cruel, but they are no worse than the Zingaran renegades who call themselves buccaneers. Zorgelitas was a buccaneer once."

"He was cruel," muttered the child. "I'm glad the Picts cut his head off."

"Hush, Tina! You must not speak thus. Look, the pirates have reached the shore. They line the beach, and one of them is coming toward the fort. That must be Strombanni."

"Ahoy, the fort there!" came a hail in a voice as gusty as the wind. "I come under a flag of truce!"

The count's helmeted head appeared over the points of the palisade. His stern face, framed in steel, surveyed the pirate somberly. Strombanni had halted just within earshot, a big man, bare-headed, with hair of the tawny hue sometimes found in Argos. Of all the Barachan sea-

rovers none was more famed for deviltry.

"Speak!" said Valenso. "I have scant desire to converse with one of your breed."

Strombanni laughed. "When you escaped me in that squall off the Trallibes last year I never thought to meet you again on the Pictish coast, Valenso! Had I known your destination, by Mitra, I should have followed you then! I got the start of my life when I saw your scarlet falcon where I had thought to see nothing but bare beach. You've found it, of course?"

"Found what?" barked the count.

"Do not try to fool me! I have come here for the same reason you have, and I'll not be balked. Where's your ship?"

"None of your affair!"

"You've lost it," asserted the pirate confidently. "I see pieces of mast in that stockade. If you'd had a ship you'd have sailed away with your plunder long ago."

"What are you talking about, damn you?" yelled the count. "My plunder? Am I a Barachan, to burn and loot? And what should I loot on this bare coast?"

"That which you came for, and which I have come for too," answered Strombanni. "I shall be easy to deal with; just give me the stuff and I'll willingly go."

"You're mad! I came here to find solitude and seclusion, which I enjoyed until you crawled out of the sea, you yellow-headed cur! Begone! I did not ask for a parley, and I weary of empty talk. Take your rogues and go your way."

"When I go, I'll leave that hovel in ashes!" roared the pirate. "For the last time, will you give me the loot in return for your lives? I have a hundred and fifty men ready to cut your throats."

The count made a quick gesture, and a shaft hummed through a loophole and splintered on Strombanni's breastplate. The pirate yelled and bounded back toward the beach with arrows whistling about him. His men roared and came on like a wave, blades gleaming.

"Curse you, dog!" raved the count, felling the offending archer with his fist. "Why did you not strike him above the gorget? Ready with your bows, men! Here they come!"

Strombanni checked his men's rush. They deployed in a long line that overlapped the ends of the western wall, advancing warily and loosing their shafts as they came. Though their archery was considered superior to that of the Zingarans, they had to rise to loose their longbows, and the Zingarans, protected by their

barrier, sent bolts and hunting-arrows back with careful aim.

The long arrows arched over the stockade and quivered upright in the earth. One struck the windowsill over which Belèsa watched. Tina cried out and flinched, staring at the vibrating shaft.

The Barachans crept forward in their widespread formation, taking advantage of the cover—which was little, for the ground had been cleared on all sides against Pictish attacks. As they got nearer to the fort, the defenders' archery became more effective. Here and there a body fell prone, its back-piece glinting in the sun and a quarrel-shaft standing up from armpit or neck. Wounded men thrashed and moaned.

At this rate the fight was all in favor of the Zingarans. But down at the boathouse men were at work with axes. The count cursed as he saw the havoc they were making among his boats, which had been laboriously built of planks sawn from solid logs.

"They make a mantlet!" he raged. "A sally now, before they complete it—while they are scattered—"

Galbro shook his head, indicating the unarmored workers with their awkward pikes. "They'd riddle us, and we should be no match for them in close fighting.

We must keep behind our walls and trust to our luck and our archery."

"Well enough," growled Valenso, "if we can keep *them* outside."

Time passed while the inconclusive archery-duel continued. Then a group of thirty men advanced, pushing a great shield made of the planks from the boats and the timbers of the boathouse itself. They had found an ox-cart and mounted the mantlet on the wheels, great solid disks of oak. As they rolled it squealing before them, it hid all but their feet from the sight of the defenders.

It rolled toward the gate, and the straggling line of archers converged upon it, shooting as they ran.

"Shoot!" yelled Valenso. "Stop them ere they reach the gate!"

A storm of arrows whistled across the palisade. Some feathered themselves harmlessly in the thick wood. Some struck the running archers; here and there a man fell or reeled back wounded toward the beach. Many went wild altogether as the defenders, despite the closing of the range, became careless with excitement. As the pirates drew nearer their long shafts began to find the loopholes; a soldier reeled and fell choking from the parapet

with an arrow through his throat.

"Shoot at their feet!" screamed Valenso. "And forty men at the gate with pikes and swords! The rest hold the wall!"

Bolts ripped into the sand before the moving shield. A howl told that one had found its mark, and a man hopped into view, cursing as he strove to withdraw the quarrel that had skewered his foot. In an instant he was hurled to the ground by the impact of a dozen bolts and arrows.

But with a deep-throated shout the pirates pushed the mantlet against the gate. Through a hole in the middle of the shield they thrust the heavy ridge-pole of the boathouse which they had converted into a ram. Arms, knotted with brawny muscles, sent the ram thundering against the gate, which groaned and shook.

With deep shouts the seamen swung the ram while from all sides the others closed in. Though there was no more room behind the shield for them to take cover, they braved the steady but weakened fire from the walls, shooting back fast and hard.

Cursing like a madman, the count sprang from the wall and ran to the gate, drawing his sword. A clump of mailed sergeants closed in about him with

spears. In another moment the gate would give and they must stop the gap with their bodies.

Then a new note entered the clamor. A trumpet blared from the ship. On the cross-tree a figure waved wildly.

The thunder of the ram ceased and Strombanni's bellow rose above the racket. "Wait! Wait, damn you! Listen!"

The sound of the trumpet and an unintelligible voice came across the water. Strombanni's voice was lifted again, and the mantlet began to recede from the gate as swiftly as it had advanced. Pirates who had been trading shafts with the defenders began picking up their wounded fellows and helping them hastily back toward the beach.

"Look!" cried Tina at her window, jumping up and down. "They flee! All of them! They run to the beach! Look! They have abandoned the shield! They leap into the longboat and pull for the ship! My lady, have we won?"

"I think not," said Belesa. She leaned out and called down to the count. "Uncle! Look yonder!"

The defenders set up a yell as they saw another ship wallowing around the southern point. As they watched, she broke out the royal flag of Zingara.

Strombanni's pirates were

swarming up the sides of their carack and heaving up the anchor. Before the stranger had come halfway across the bay, the *Red Hand* was vanishing around the northern horn.

III

The Demon in the Cave

The blue mist had condensed into a monstrous black figure, dimly seen and not quite definite, that filled the hither end of the cave, blotting out the still seated figures behind. There was an impression of shagginess, pointed ears, and close-set horns on a grotesque head.

Even as the great arms shot out like tentacles towards his throat, Conan, quick as a flash, struck at them with his Pictish ax. It was like chopping at a trunk of the ebony tree. The force of the blow broke the handle of the tomahawk and sent the copper head flying with a clank against the side of the tunnel, but so far as the Cimmerian could tell the blade had not bitten into the flesh of his foe at all. It took more than an ordinary edge to pierce a demon's hide. And then the great fingers closed upon his throat, to break his neck as if it were a reed. Not since he had fought Baal-pteor, hand to hand in the temple of Hanu-

man in Zamboula, had Conan felt such a grip upon him.

As the hairy fingers touched his skin, the barbarian tensed the thickly-corded muscles of his massive neck, drawing his head down between his shoulders to give his unnatural foe the least possible purchase. He dropped the knife and the broken hatchet-handle, seized the huge black wrists, swung his legs upward and forward, and drove both bare heels with all his might against the chest of the thing, straightening out his long body.

The tremendous impulse of Conan's mighty back and legs tore his neck loose from that lethal grip and sent him shooting like an arrow back up the tunnel down which he had come. He landed on the stone floor on his back and flipped over in a back-somersault on his feet, ready to flee or fight as occasion required.

But as he stood there, glaring with bared teeth at the door to the inner cave, no black monstrous form shambled out after him. Almost as soon as Conan had wrenched himself loose the form had begun to dissolve back into the blue mist from which it had condensed. Now it was all gone.

Conan stood poised, ready to whirl and bound completely out of the tunnel. The superstitious fears of the barbarian whirled

through his mind. Though he was fearless to the point of rashness toward men and beasts, the supernatural he had learned was not to be challenged lightly.

So this was why the Picts had gone! He should have suspected some such danger. He remembered such demonological lore as he had picked up in his youth in cloudy Cimmeria and later in his wanderings over most of the civilized world. Fire and silver were said to be deadly to devils, but he had neither at the moment. Still, if they took gross material form, they were in some measure subject to the limitations of that form. This lumbering monster, for instance, could run no faster than a beast of its general shape, and Conan thought that he could outdistance it in short order if need be.

But braggadocio was as strong in the Cimmerian as fear. He mustered his courage for a shout. "Ho, there, ugly-face, come out if you're coming!"

There was no reply. The blue mist swirled in the chamber, but remained in its diffused form. Fingering his bruised neck, Conan tried to remember a Pictish tale he had heard before. Then as he stared into the dim place beyond, something about the figures there fitted with another tale he had been told by the pi-

rates of the South, until the two legends became one.

This must be the hiding place of Tranicos, who had fled with a fabled treasure to the North.

There had been eleven with him, and the Pictish legends spoke of twelve strange men who came out of the sea. They fell on a Pictish village, and put all the folk to the sword, except a few who fled in time. Then they found a cave and leaped it with gold and jewels. But a shaman of the Picts—one who had escaped—made magic and evoked a demon from one of the lower hells, and by his sorcerous powers he forced this demon to enter the cavern and strangle the men as they sat at wine. And, lest the demon thereafter molest the Picts themselves, the shaman confined it by his magic to the inner cavern. The tale spread from tribe to tribe, until all the clans shunned the accursed spot.

It fitted. Yet according to the tale, the demon was all of blackness, in keeping with Pictish magic. The blueness of the glow was wrong. Conan shuddered, remembering the things in the crypts of haunted Stygia, far to the south. If by some chance a Stygian influence touched the demon, the old spell might not still apply—and Stygians were said to dabble at times in the magic of others, riding the night as

spirits to practice their foul sorcery.

Conan considered. But the pull of the wine still lying in bottles at the table, still corked safely and waiting to be opened, drew him. He licked his lips, but common sense finally overcame the urge to beard the demon again.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Conan turned to the outer cavern where the other chests lay, which might contain something he could use. His hopes rose as it proved a tough nut to crack with the knife he still had, but all he found inside when it finally opened were silks and fine raiment. Near the bottom, he came on men's clothing of ancient cut and manner, but apparently well-preserved by the chest. He found even boots to fit him, with the well-oiled leather still in good condition.

He passed down the chests, loaded mostly with golden coins and baubles of little use to him, until he came to one that was filled with jeweled swords. Then he grinned in satisfaction and began looking until he found one that pleased him—a broadsword of fine steel, heavy enough for his use, yet with a fine jewel in the hilt, which seemed to be of solid silver. He buckled it on with more enthusiasm than he had shown for days, and slapped

his hand on the hilt, nodding at the feel.

The thought of the silver of the hilt brought his mind back to the demon. Now he grunted and began searching the chests he had opened until he found a strip of silver-worked cloth, which he bound around his neck; the silver might be false—the shops of Ophir had held cloth that seemed all gold and silver, yet proved worthless. But it might be worth a try.

The blue mist still coiled in the inner cavern as Conan's eyes passed over the seated corpses to a chest that lay half-open near the entrance. Even in the smoky light, the sparkle of rubies caught his eyes. He decided reluctantly against the wine, which would be too hard to reach, but the gems would be useful, if ever he escaped this forsaken coast. And it rankled his spirit to leave without giving the demon another try.

With a sudden tigerish leap, he was inside the cavern, his hand outstretched to the sack of jewels. The demon began gathering, swirled up quickly, and was suddenly at him.

With a snarl, the Cimmerian drew back, but he did not drop the sack of jewels. He twisted them into his girdle, before his hand darted to his sword and wrenched it out of its scabbard.

Something struck him on the throat, knocking him further into the cavern, but he kept his feet, and turned to meet the charge, with the heavy sword already whining through the air toward the gross form of blackness that was charging toward him.

It struck again, throwing him aside, but he lit cat-like on his feet and one hand, keeping his grasp on the hilt of the sword. He rebounded to his feet as a lynx springs back with bared, snarling fangs, glaring at the demon from under his tousled mane. Fear left him for its demoniacal powers, and a wave of murderous fury washed over him. In a crimson mist, he struck out at the demon.

The sword rebounded with a clang of good steel, and the demon came on, its great hands spread toward his throat. Conan cursed as the hands met the silver cloth and went on; it was truly an Ophirian fakery, since there was no cry from the monster as should have been when it first touched silver.

He jerked his head down, and tossed the sword, catching it in reverse. His hand brought the hilt down against the inky chest that was pulling him closer. This time, there was a scream of hellish anguish from the thing. It

dropped him from its squeezing hands, while he followed up the blow with a rain of others, driven with all the strength of his terrible muscles.

But the demon came in again, writhing and moaning, yet unable to resist its compulsion to kill all that was of human flesh. Conan went to his knees under a lashing blow. As he bounded up, the demon was on him, towering over him, and again lashing down with its gross hands. He was tossed to and fro in the violence of the attack. He felt his brain reel with the punishment he was taking, and his breath came in whistling gasps between his teeth. High above, he saw the great, ugly face, outlined in the bluish glow that still emanated from it. With a hoarse cry that was half fury and half agony, he lunged upwards, driving the hilt of the sword toward the face, until it sank into the bulk above him.

With a volcanic burst, it gathered itself together and screamed. Now it was battering him aside, trying to escape the punishment his blows were inflicting. One great arm caught him wildly, and lifted him up, to toss him like a chip in a raging storm out through the entrance. His head scraped against rock of the dome of the outer cavern, and then he was landing, barely

doubling himself to take the blow on his rounded shoulder. His lips tightened at the agony, but no bones snapped, and he darted to his feet and swung to face his enemy.

Only the blue mist met his eyes, but it began to lift itself, moaning weakly, as he moved forward beyond the line that restrained it. Conan drew back. For the moment, he was too weak to risk it again, and the rubies in the sack would have to satisfy him.

He found another tunic to replace the torn one he wore and clothed himself again. His senses were clearing now, though his muscles still ached from the pounding he had taken. He closed the massive door behind him and staggered out, where the fresh air and the smell of the sea could revive him.

Then his breath caught. From the direction of the sea, there came the beating of a drum, the hollow, carrying sound of a stretched-skin drum, unlike any hollowed log of the Picts. Conan felt the hair at the nape of his neck rise with old memories of that sound.

"Crom!" he muttered, stirring uneasily. "I thought I smelled a Stygian taint on that Pictish demon!"

However, he wasted no more time, but began heading out

from the cavern. At the moment, he wanted distance from the demon, and a great deal of it. Then he grinned wolfishly.

Even a Stygian priest would mean people and boats that might be stolen to carry him back to the worlds of the South. He headed straight for the sound of the drum, and even when it stopped, he continued steadily onward.

IV

The Dark Stranger

Back at the fort, the count snapped out orders. "Out, quick! Drag that mantlet in before these strangers can land!"

"But Strombanni has fled," said Galbro, "and yonder ship is Zingaran."

"Do as I command!" shouted Valenso. "My enemies are not all foreigners. Out, dogs, thirty of you, and fetch the mantlet into the stockade!"

Before the Zingaran ship had dropped anchor, about where the pirate ship had docked, Valenso's thirty stalwarts had trundled the device back to the gate and manhandled it sidewise through an opening.

Up in the window of the manor-house, Tina asked wonderingly, "Why does not the count open the gate and go to

meet them? Is he afraid that the man he fears might be on that ship?"

"What do you mean, Tina?" asked Belesa uneasily. Though no man to run from an enemy, the count had never vouchsafed a reason for his self-exile. Belesa found this conviction of Tina's disquieting; but Tina seemed not to have heard.

"The men are back in the stockade," she said. "The gate is closed again and barred, and they are bracing it with boards from the mantlet. The men still keep their places along the wall. My lady, if that ship was chasing Strombanni, why did it not keep on after him? It is not a war-galley, but a carack like the other. Look, a boat is coming ashore. I see a man in the bow, wrapped in a dark cloak."

When the boat grounded, this man paced in leisurely fashion up the sands, followed by three others. He was a tall, wiry man in black silk and polished steel.

"Halt!" roared the count. "I will parley with your leader, alone!"

The tall stranger removed his helmet and made a sweeping bow. His companions halted, drawing their cloaks about them, and behind them the sailors leaned upon their oars and stared at the flag floating over the paliade in the quiet breeze.

When the leader came within easy vocal distance of the gate he called: "Surely there should be no suspicion between gentlemen on these naked seas and bleak shores!"

Valenso stared at him warily. The stranger was dark, with a lean predatory face and a thin black mustache.

"You are Black Zarrono, the buccaneer," Valenso accused him.

Again the stranger bowed with stately elegance. "And none could fail to know the red falcon of the Korzettas!"

"It seems this coast has become the rendezvous of all the rogues of the southern seas," growled Valenso. "What do you wish?"

"Come, sir!" remonstrated Zarrono. "This is a churlish greeting to one who has just rendered you a service. Was not that Argossean dog, Strombanni, but now thundering at your gate? And did he not take to his sea-heels when he saw me round the point?"

"True, but there is little to chose between a pirate and a renegade."

Zarrono laughed without resentment and twirled his mustache. "You're blunt in speech, my lord. No renegade I; I do but prey upon the legitimate foes of the crown of Zingara, in accordance with the letter of marque

granted me by our liege lord the late king."

"Ha," said Valenso. "And upon any others too weak to defend themselves. What would you?"

"I desire only leave to anchor in your bay, to let my men hunt for meat and water in your woods and, perhaps, to drink a goblet of wine myself at your board."

"I see not how I can stop you," said Valenso. "But understand this, Zarrono: no man of your crew comes within this palisade. If one approaches closer than thirty paces, he shall presently find an arrow through his gizzard. And I charge you to do no harm to my gardens or the cattle in the pens. One steer you may have for fresh meat, but no more. And do not think we cannot hold this fort against your ruffians."

"You were not holding it very successfully against Strombanni," said the buccaneer with a smile.

"You'll find no planks for mantlets this time," assured the count grimly, "and your men are not Barachans and so no better archers than mine. Besides, the little loot in this place would not be worth the price."

"Who speaks of loot and battle?" protested Zarrono. "Nay, my lads are sick to stretch their legs ashore, and nigh to scurvy for want of fresh food. May they

come ashore? I guarantee their good conduct."

Valenso signified a grudging consent. Zarrono bowed and retired with a tread as stately as if he trod the polished crystal floor of the Kordovan royal court, where it was said he had once been a familiar figure.

Valenso ordered Galbro: "Let no man leave the stockade. I trust not that renegade cur. The fact that he drove Strombanni from our gate is no guarantee that he too would not cut our throats."

So nobody stirred from the palisade while the buccaneers came ashore, dark-faced men in flaming silk and shining steel, with scarves around their heads and golden hoops in their ears. They looked smaller and less ferocious than the Barachans, who were mainly Argossean sailors turned outlaw; but on the other hand, they were better clad, armed, and disciplined. Bel-esa, watching from her window, knew of the enmity between the pirates and the Zingaran buccaneers. To the ancient feud between Argos and Zingara, and the rivalry of opposing interests, was added the rancor aroused by the quasi-legal status of the buccaneers, who operated with the connivance of their own government, while the Barachans were the enemies of all men.

The buccaneers camped on the beach, a hundred and seventy-odd of them, having posted look-outs at the points of the horns that inclosed the bay. The steer designated by Valenso was driven forth and slaughtered, but otherwise the buccaneers did not molest the gardens. Fires were kindled on the strand, and a cask of ale was brought ashore and broached.

Other kegs were filled with water from the spring that rose a short distance south of the fort. Several men, crossbows in their hands, began to straggle toward the woods. Seeing this, Valenso sent a shout to Zarrono.

"Keep your men from the forest! If you lack meat, take another steer. If the men go tramping into the woods they'll fall foul of the Picts. Whole tribes of the painted devils live back there; they attacked us when we landed, and since then they've murdered six of my men at one time or another. Our peace with them hangs by a thread, so risk not stirring them up!"

Zarrono shot a startled glance at the woods, then bowed and shouted for his men to come back.

As evening drew on, a thin skim of gray crawled up from the sea-rim and overcast the sky. The sun sank in a wallow of crimson, touching the tips of the

black waves with blood. Fog crawled out of the sea and lapped at the feet of the forest, curling around the stockade in smoky wisps. The fires on the beach shone dull crimson through the mist, and the singing of the buccaneers seemed far away. They had made shelters along the strand of old canvas from the carack. The beef was roasting and the ale was doled out sparingly.

The great gate was shut and barred. Soldiers tramped the ledges of the palisade, pike on shoulder, beads of moisture glistening on their iron caps. They glanced uneasily toward the fires on the beach and the vague dark line of the forest. The compound lay bare and dark save where candles gleamed feebly through the cracks of the huts, and light streamed from the windows of the manor. There was silence save for the tread of the sentries, the drip of water from the eaves, and the distant singing of the buccaneers.

Some faint echo of this singing penetrated into the great hall where Valenso sat at wine with his self-invited guest.

Impassive attendants ranged the walls: sergeants with pikes and helmets, servants in satin tunics. Valenso's household in this wild land was a shadowy re-

flection of the court that he had kept in Kordava. While the manor-house was devoid of ornamentation outside, within it was as nearly a copy of Korzetta castle as possible. The count had driven his folk night and day for months. The logs that composed the walls were hidden under heavy gold-worked silken tapestries. Ship's beams, stained and polished, formed the ceiling. The floor and the broad staircase were covered with rich carpets. A fire in the wide stone fireplace dispelled the damp. Candles in the great silver candelabrum in the center of the broad table, which could have accommodated fifty guests, lit the hall and threw long shadows on the stairs. Count Valenso sat at the head of the table, presiding over a company composed of his niece, his piratical guest, Galbro the senechal, and the captain of the guard.

"What could tempt a pirate to this naked land?" mused Valenso staring into his goblet.

"What could tempt a Count of Zingara?" retorted Zarrono, an avid light in his eyes.

"The rottenness of the royal court might sicken a man of honor."

"Korzettas of honor have endured its rottenness with tranquility for generations. My lord, indulge my curiosity: Why did

you sell your lands, load your galleon with the furnishings of your castle, and sail over the horizon out of the knowledge of the regent and the nobles of Zingara? And why settle here, when your sword and your name might win a place for you in any civilized land?"

Valenso toyed with the golden seal-chain about his neck. "As to why I left Zingara, that is my own affair. But chance stranded me here. I had brought my people and much of the furnishings you mentioned ashore, meaning to build a temporary habitation wherein to winter. But a sudden storm from the west drove my ship on the rocks of the northern point and wrecked it. After that we could but make the best of it."

"Then you'd return to civilization if you could?"

"Not to Kordava. Perhaps to some far clime—Hyrkania, or fabled Vendhya . . ."

Zarrono addressed himself to Belesa: "Do you not find it tedious here, my lady?"

Hunger to see a new face and hear a new voice had brought the girl to the great hall that night, but now she wished that she had remained in her chamber with Tina. There was no mistaking the meaning of Zarrono's glance. Though his speech was decorous

and his expression respectful, the man's violent and sinister spirit gleamed through the mask.

"There is little diversity," she answered in a low voice.

Zarrono bluntly asked his host, "If you had a ship, sir, would you abandon this settlement?"

"Perhaps."

"I have a ship. Could we reach an agreement—"

"What sort of agreement?"

Valenso lifted his head to stare suspiciously at his guest.

"Share and share alike," said Zarrono, laying his hand on the board with the fingers spread wide, like the legs of a giant spider. The fingers quivered with tension.

"Share what?" Valenso stared in evident bewilderment. "My gold went down with my ship and, unlike the broken timbers, did not wash ashore."

"Not that!" Zarrono made an impatient gesture. "Let's be frank, my lord. Can you pretend that chance landed you at this spot, with two thousand miles of coast to choose from?"

"There is no need for me to pretend," answered Valenso coldly. "My ship's master was one Zorgelitas, formerly a buccaneer. He had sailed this coast and persuaded me to land here, telling me he had a reason he would later disclose. But this reason he never divulged because the day

after we landed he disappeared into the woods, and his headless body was found later by a hunting party. Obviously he had been slain by Picts."

Zarrono stared at Valenso for a space. "Sink me! I believe you, my lord. A Korzetta has no skill at lying, whatever his other accomplishments. I'll make you a proposal. I will admit I anchored in the bay with other plans in mind; but circumstances have caused me to change my mind . . ." He cast a glance at Belesa that brought color to her face, and continued. "I have a ship to carry you out of exile, with your household and such of your retainers as you choose. The rest can fend for themselves."

The attendants along the walls shot uneasy sidelong glances at each other. Zarrono went on, too brutally cynical to hide his intentions. "But first you must help me secure the treasure for which I've sailed a thousand miles."

"What treasure, in Mitra's name?" cried the count. "Now you're yammering like that dog Strombanni."

"Have you ever heard of Bloody Tranicos, the greatest of the Barachan pirates?"

"Who has not! He stormed the island castle of the exiled prince, Maatneb of Stygia, put the people to the sword, and bore off the

treasure the prince had brought with him when he fled from Khemi," Valenso said.

"Aye! And the tale of that treasure brought the men of the Red Brotherhood swarming like vultures for carrion—pirates, buccaneers, and even the wild black corsairs from the South. Fearing betrayal, Tranicos fled northward with one ship and vanished from the knowledge of men, a hundred years ago. But the tale persists that one man survived that last voyage and returned to the Barachas, only to be captured by a Zingaran war-galley. Before he was hanged he told his story and drew a map in his own blood, on parchment, which he somehow smuggled out of his captor's reach." Zarrono nodded, then went on.

"Tranicos had sailed far beyond the paths of shipping until he came to a bay on a lonely coast, and there he anchored. He went ashore, taking his treasure and eleven of his most trusted captains. Following his orders the ship sailed away, to return in a week and pick up their admiral and his captains. The ship returned at the appointed time, but there was no trace of Tranicos and his eleven except the shelter they had built on the beach.

"This had been demolished, and there were tracks of naked feet about it, but no sign of fight-

ing. Nor was there any trace of treasure. The pirates plunged into the forest to search for their chief. They sent one of their number up a tree to spy, and this one reported that not far ahead a great steep-sided crag or dome rose like a tower from the forest. They started forward again, but then were attacked by a party of Picts and driven back to their ship. In despair they heaved anchor and sailed away, but before they raised the Barachas a terrific storm wrecked the ship, and only that one man survived."

"That then is the tale of the Treasure of Tranicos, which men have sought in vain for nearly a century. That the map exists is known, but its whereabouts remains a mystery," Zarrono said. "I have had one glimpse of that map. Strombanni and Zorgelitas were with me, and a Nemedian who sailed with the Barachans. We looked upon it in a hovel in Messantia, where we were skulking in disguise. Somebody knocked over the lamp, and somebody howled in the dark, and when we got the light on again the old miser who owned the map was dead from a stab, and the map was gone, and the watch was clattering down the street with their pikes to investigate the clamor. We scattered and all went our respective ways.

"For years Strombanni and I watched one another, each supposing the other to have the chart. Well, as it turned out, neither had it, but lately word came to me that Strombanni had departed northward, so I followed. You saw the end of that chase.

"I had but a glimpse of the map in the miser's hut, but Strombanni's actions show that he knows this is the bay where Tranicos anchored. I believe they hid the treasure on or near that great rocky hill the scout reported and were slain by the Picts then or while returning.

"This is my proposal: Let us combine forces. We can leave enough men to hold the fort against Strombanni, locate this hill, find the treasure, load it upon my ship, and sail for some foreign port where I can cover my past with gold. I'm sick of this life, and would go back to civilization and live like a man of quality, with wealth and slaves and a castle—and a wife of noble blood."

"Well?" demanded the count, slit-eyed with suspicion.

"Give me your niece for my wife," demanded the buccaneer.

Belesa cried out sharply and started to her feet. Valenso likewise rose, his fingers knotting about his goblet as if he meant to hurl it at his guest. Zarrono

sat still, his eyes smoldering with passion and menace.

"You dare?" cried Valenso.

Zarrono rasped, "You forget you have fallen from your high estate, Count Valenso. We are not at the Kordavan court, my lord. Here nobility is measured by armed might, and there I rank you. Strangers tread Korzetta Castle, and the Korzetta fortune is at the bottom of the sea. Without my ship you will die here in exile. You shall not regret the union of our houses. With a new name and a new fortune you will find that Black Zarrono can take his place among the aristocrats of the world."

"You are mad to dream of it!" exclaimed the count violently. "You—who is that?"

A patter of small feet distracted his attention. Tina hurried into the hall, hesitated when she saw the count's eyes fixed angrily upon her, curtseyed, and sidled around the table to seize Belesa's hands. She was panting, her slippers were damp, and her flaxen hair was plastered down on her head.

"Tina!" exclaimed Belesa. "Where have you been? I thought you were in your chamber hours ago."

"I was, but I missed the coral necklace you gave me and I was

afraid you wouldn't let me go if you knew, and a soldier's wife helped me out of the stockade and back, and please, my lady, do not make me tell who it was, and I found the necklace where I bathed this morning. Please punish me if I have done anything wrong."

"Tina!" groaned Belesa, embracing her. "I'll not punish you, but you should never have gone outside with the buccaneers on the beach and the Picts in the woods. Let me take you to your chamber—"

"Yes, my lady, but first let me tell you about the black man—"

"What?" Valenso's goblet clattered to the floor. He caught the table with both hands, his face livid and his eyes popping. "What, wench?" he panted, glaring wildly.

"A b-black man, my lord," stammered Tina, shrinking back against Belesa while the others stared in amazement at the horrifying change in the count's manner. "When—when I went down to the pool to get my necklace I saw him. I was afraid and hid behind a ridge of sand. He came from the sea in a strange black boat with blue fire playing all about it, but there was no torch. He drew his boat up on the sands below the south point and strode into the forest, looking like a giant in the fog—a

great tall man, dark like a Kushite—"

Valenso reeled, clutched at his throat, and snapped the golden chain about his neck in his violence. With the face of a madman he lurched around the table and tore the screaming child from Belesa's arms.

"You little slut," he panted. "You lie! You've heard me mumbling in my sleep and have told this lie to torment me! Say you lie before I tear the skin from your back!"

"Uncle!" cried Belesa, trying to free Tina from his grasp. "Are you mad? What are you about?"

With a snarl he tore her hand from his arm and spun her into the arms of Galbro, who clutched her to him with a leer.

"Mercy, my lord!" sobbed Tina. "I did not lie!"

"I say you lied!" roared Valenso. "Gebellez!"

A serving-man seized the trembling youngster and stripped her with one wrench. Wheeling, he drew her slender arms over his shoulders, lifting her kicking feet clear off the floor.

"Uncle!" shrieked Belesa, writhing vainly in Galbro's lustful grasp. "You are mad! you cannot—"

Her voice choked as Valenso brought a jewel-handled riding-

whip down across the child's body with a force that left a red weal. Belesa moaned in anguish. Valenso lashed away with the staring eyes of a madman, panting.

"You lie! You lie! Curse you, you lie! Admit your guilt, or I will flay your stubborn body. *He* could not have followed me here . . ."

"Have mercy, my lord!" screamed the child, too frantic with fear to save herself by a lie. "I saw him! Mercy!"

Some shred of sanity seemed to return to Count Valenso of Korzetta. Dropping the whip, he reeled against the table, clutching at its edge. He shook as with an ague, his hair plastered across his forehead in dark strands, and sweat-dripping from his livid countenance. Tina, released by Gebellez, slipped to the floor in a whimpering heap. Belesa tore free from Galbro, rushed to her, and gathered the waif into her arms. She lifted her face to her uncle to pour her wrath upon him—but he was not looking at her; he seemed to have forgotten the two girls.

"I accept your offer, Zarrono. In Mitra's name, let us find this accursed treasure and be gone from this damned coast!"

In stunned silence Belesa carried the sobbing child up the stairs. A glance backward

showed Valenso crouching at the table, gulping wine from a goblet which he gripped in both shaking hands, while Zarrono towered over him like a somber bird of prey, talking in a low, decisive voice. Valenso was nodding in mute agreement; Galbro stood back in the shadows, chin in hand, and the attendants along the walls glanced at each other with furtive alarm.

In her chamber Belesa, feeling sick and bewildered, laid Tina on the bed and set herself to wash and annoy the weals and cuts in the girl's skin. Tina moaned faintly. Fear of and hatred toward her uncle grew in Belesa's soul. She had never loved him, for he was a harsh and grasping man, apparently without natural affection. But at least she had deemed him just and fearless. Now, however, roused to frenzy by some terrible dread, he had brutalized the only creature she loved, and proposed to sell her, his own niece, to this infamous outlaw. What lay behind this madness?

The child muttered. "I never lied, my lady! Indeed, I did not! A black man in a black boat that burned like blue fire on the water! A tall man almost as dark as a Negro, wrapped in a black cloak! He left his boat and went into the forest. Why did

the count whip me for seeing him?"

"Hush," Belesa said. "Lie still; the hurt will soon pass."

The door opened behind her and she whirled and snatched up her jeweled dagger. The count stood in the door, his face gray and drawn, his eyes staring in a way that made her flesh crawl. He seemed an utter stranger to her. She raised the dagger.

"If you touch her again," she whispered from dry lips, "I swear before Mitra that I will sheathe this blade in your breast."

He did not heed her. "I have posted a strong guard about the manor," he said. "Zarrono brings his men into the stockade tomorrow. When he has found the treasure we shall sail."

"And you will sell me to him?"

He fixed her with a gloomy gaze from which all considerations but his own self-interest had been crowded out. "You shall do as I command." There was no human feeling in his voice.

He turned and left the chamber. Blinded by a rush of horror, Belesa sank sobbing beside the couch.

Tina lifted a tear-stained face and whispered, "We must go, my lady! Zarrono shall not have you. Let's flee into the forest,

and when we can go no further we can lie down and die together."

It seemed to Belesa the only escape from the shadows that had been closing in upon her ever since she had left Zingara. "We will go, child."

She rose and was fumbling for a cloak when an exclamation from Tina caused her to turn. The girl was on her feet, a finger at her lips, her eyes wide with terror.

Belesa whispered: "What is it?"

"Somebody in the hall outside. He stopped at our door, then went on toward the count's chamber."

"Perchance it was the count himself, or Galbro."

Belesa moved to open the door, but Tina clutched her frantically. "No, no, my lady! Not the door! I fear some evil thing is out there!"

Belesa patted her and reached for the little metal disk that covered the peep-hole.

"He is coming back!" quavered Tina. "I hear him!"

Belesa heard a curious stealthy pad of feet. Who could it be? She remembered the sergeants on guard below, and if Zarrono had stayed the night there would be a man-at-arms before his door too.

She extinguished the candle

so that it should not shine through the peep-hole and pushed aside the copper disk. Someone was moving along the darkened corridor; she sensed rather than saw a dim bulk moving past her doorway. A cold wave of terror swept over her.

The figure passed on to the head of the stairs, where it was limned momentarily against the faint glow from below. It was a man, but not any man such as Belesa was familiar with. She had an impression of a shaven head with aloof aquiline features, and a glossy brown skin, lighter than that of a Negro but darker than that of her swarthy countrymen. The head towered on broad massive shoulders swathed in a black cloak. Then the intruder was gone.

Belesa crouched in darkness, awaiting the outcry that would arouse the soldiers. But the manor remained silent. This was no ordinary skulker, she thought, realizing that the sight had robbed her of her recent resolution.

She fumbled with flint and steel to relight the candle. The flame flared up, illuminating Tina's white face.

"It was the black man!" whispered Tina. "My blood turned cold, just as it did when I saw him on the beach. Why did not

the sergeants see him? Shall we rouse the count?"

Belesa shook her head. She did not care to repeat the scene that had followed Tina's first mention of the dark stranger. In any event she dared not venture out into the hallway.

"We cannot go into the forest!" shuddered Tina. "He will be lurking there."

The same thought had struck Belesa; the determination that had earlier faced almost certain death now faltered at the thought of traversing those black woods haunted by this dark sinister creature.

Tina slept presently on the couch, whimpering occasionally in her sleep. Belesa watched. Toward dawn she became aware of a stifling quality in the air, and heard a low rumble of thunder. Extinguishing the candle, she opened the shutters and looked out. From her window, facing south, she could see both the ocean and a belt of forest behind the fort.

Along the eastern horizon ran a pale streak that presaged dawn. The fog had disappeared, and out to sea a dark mass was rising from the horizon. Lightning flickered from it and low thunder growled. An answering rumble came from the woods.

Startled, Belesa stared at that brooding black rampart. A

strange rhythmic pulsing came to her ears—a deep droning reverberation that was not at all like the hollow clack of a Pictish log-drum.

"A drum!" muttered Tina, waking. "The black man—beating on a black drum—in the black woods—Mitra save us . . ."

Belesa shuddered. The black cloud of the western horizon was swelling and expanding, writhing and billowing. She stared in amazement, for the previous summer there had been no storms on this coast at this time of year, and she had never seen a cloud like this.

It came pouring up over the world-rim in great boiling masses of blackness veined with blue fire. The inky horizon was torn with lightning-flashes. Afar to sea Belesa saw white-capped waves racing before the wind and heard its droning roar mingled with the reverberations of the thunder and the boom of the drum from the forest. The air about the fort still hung hot and breathless. Somewhere a shutter slammed and a woman's voice was lifted in alarm.

Belesa looked toward the forest, her flesh crawling as she visualized a dark ominous figure squatting under black branches and beating out a nameless incantation on a drum of exotic

design. Then she looked seaward again as a blaze of lightning split the sky. Against its glare she saw the mast of Zarrono's ship, the tents of the buccaneers, and the ridges of the south point as plainly as by sunlight. Louder and louder rose the roar of the wind, and now the manor awoke. Feet pounded up the stairs; Zarrono's voice yelled and was answered by that of the count. Doors slammed.

"Why did you not warn me of the weather?" howled the buccaneer. "If the anchor fails to hold—"

"A storm has never come from the west before at this time of year!" shrieked Valenso, rushing from his chamber barefooted, in his furred nightrobe, his hair standing on end. "This is the work of—"

Thunder drowned his words as he raced up the ladder to the lookout tower, followed by the cursing Zarrono.

Belesa crouched at her window, awed and deafened. Louder and louder rose the wind until it drowned all other sound but the crash of thunder and the roll of the drum which now rose like an inhuman chant of triumph. The storm swooped inshore, driving before it a foaming league-long crest of white. The surf roared over the sands, drowning the coals of the fires that the seamen

had built. The wind hit like a thunder-clap, whipping the tents of the buccaneers to ribbons and whirling them away; rain swept the beach in a driving torrent.

Just before she got the shutters closed, as the first drops whipped past her window, Belesa saw the buccaneers run staggering toward the fort, almost beaten to the sands by the fury of the blast; and against the blue glare she saw Zarrono's ship, ripped loose from her mooring, driven headlong against the jagged rocks that jutted up to receive her.

V

A Man from the Wilds

The sun rose in a blaze of fresh gold, into a clear blue rain-washed sky. Bright birds sang from trees whose leaves bore beads of rain-water sparkling like diamonds.

Beyond the fringe of trees and bushes, Galaccus the Kothian bent to wash his hands and face. In the midst of the big pirate's gruntings and splashings, he lifted his head suddenly, his hair dripping and water running over his shoulders. He listened, then in one swift motion was on his feet, sword in hand.

A man even bigger than him-

self was striding toward him over the sands, a heavy broadsword in one hand and a haunch of wild boar in the other. The pirate's eyes widened as he stared at the long loose tunic ornamented with semi-precious stones, the wide-topped boots, and the broad-brimmed black felt hat such as had been worn by Zingaran grandees of a century ago, before the tighter-fitting Hyborian fashions had invaded the land. The pirate paled with recognition.

"Conan! By Mitra, not *you!*" Oaths streamed from his lips as he heaved up his sword.

Conan's blue eyes were as cold as the seas beyond Vanaheim, but there was a feral grin on his dark, scarred face as he tossed his haunch of meat aside and stepped forward. "It seems the storm brought me luck," he said. "First the boar—and now you, Galaccus!"

The birds rose like flaming rockets from the trees as the clang of steel interrupted their song. Blue sparks flew from the hacking blades, and the sand ground under stamping boot-heels. Galaccus was a veteran brawler, skilled in every foul trick of the pirates and polished in his swordcraft by a thousand fights by sea and land. He came in with a rush, but there was already fear in his vitals as he

pitted his blade against the other, wielded by muscles hardened in the harsh lands beyond the last edges of civilization. Against him, Conan's blade flashed with a speed and strength that no civilized man could match, and the heavy blade seemed but a toy in his hands. Skill was useless against the fury of his answering charge, and to his natural wolfish force he had added the skill of the long nights of practice among mercenaries from countless lands and the professional warriors of Aquilonia.

Galaccus fought with the fear of death already heavy on him, and with an answering desperation that drove him to strain every last ounce of effort to parry the heavy blade that danced like a thing alive around his head. He lunged and parried, then caught a sweeping stroke near his hilt, and the terrific impact turned his arm numb from fingers to elbow. Without pause, the stroke was followed by a thrust with such smashing power behind it that the heavy blade ripped through his shoulder, sheering off his arm, and drove down into his ribs like a knife through soft tallow.

The pirate went to his knees with a rattling gasp, while blood pumped from his severed arteries. The hilt dropped from his

nerveless hand and fell prone upon the reddening sand. With a dying effort, he fumbled at his girdle and drew something from it. He tried to lift the object to his mouth, but died before he could do so.

Conan shook the red drops from his sword, grinned with unaffected pleasure, and stretched himself like a panther after a full meal. Then he bent to study the paper that was crumpled in Galaccus' death grasp. He grinned again, bent and tore the fingers from the object that had seemed more important than death to the pirate.

Zarrono and Valenso stood on the beach, staring at the driftwood that their men were gathering—spars, pieces of mast, broken timbers. So savagely had the storm hammered Zarrono's ship against the rocks that most of the salvage was matchwood.

Zarrono cursed venomously, but Valenso seemed dazed. "It is not the time of the year for storms from the west," he muttered, staring with haggard eyes. "We had none last summer. It was not chance that brought that one out of the deep to balk my escape. I am caught like a mouse in a trap, as are we all. . ."

"I know nothing of what you speak," snarled Zarrono, yanking

his mustache. "I have been unable to get any sense out of you since that flaxen-haired brat so roiled you last night with her tale of black men from the sea. But I'll not spend my life here. Ten of my men went to hell on the ship, but I have a hundred and sixty left. You have a hundred, and tools, and there are plenty of trees. I'll set men to felling them as soon as they complete their present task, and we'll build a ship."

"It will take months," muttered Valenso.

"How better occupy our time? The sooner begun the sooner completed, and whilst building we'll hunt for Tranicos' treasure. I hope the storm smashed that Argossean dog to bits."

"We shall never complete this ship," said Valenso somberly.

"You fear the Picts? We have men enough to defy them."

"I do not speak of Picts, but of the black one."

Zarrono turned on him angrily. "Will you speak sense? Who is this accursed black man?"

"Accursed indeed." Valenso stared seaward. "A shadow of mine own red-stained past risen up to hound me to hell. Because of him I fled Zingara, hoping to lose my trail in the great ocean. But I should have known he would smell me out at last."

"If such a man came ashore

he must be hiding in the forest," growled Zarrono. "We'll rake the woods and hunt him out."

Valenso laughed harshly. "Seek rather the shadow of a cloud in the moonlight; grope in the dark for an asp; follow the mist that rises from a swamp at midnight."

Zarrono cast him an uncertain look, as if doubting his sanity. "Who is this man? Have done with ambiguity."

"The shadow of my own mad cruelty and ambition; no man of common flesh and blood, but a—"

"Sail ho!" bawled the lookout on the northern point.

Zarrono wheeled and his voice slashed the wind. "D'you know her?"

"Aye! It's the *Red Haand!*"

Zarrono cursed like a wild man. "Strombanni! The demons take care of their own! How could he ride out that blow?" The buccaneer's voice rose to a yell. "Back to the fort, dogs!"

Before the *Red Hand*, somewhat battered in appearance, nosed around the point, the beach was bare of human life and the palisade bristled with steel. Zarrono ground his teeth as a longboat swung in to the beach and he sighted the tawny head of his rival in the bow. The boat grounded, and Strom-

banni started toward the fort alone.

Some distance away he halted and bellowed. "Ahoy the fort! I would parley!"

"Well, why do you not?" snarled Zarrono.

"The last time I approached under a flag of truce an arrow broke on my brisket!"

"You asked for it," said Valenso. "I gave you fair warning to get away from us."

"Well, I want a promise it shan't happen again."

"You have my promise!" called Zarrono with a sardonic smile.

"Damn your promise! I want Valenso's word!"

The count, with some remaining air of dignified authority, called, "Advance, but keep your men back. You shall not be shot at."

"That's enough for me," said Strombanni. "Whatever a Korzetta's sins, you can trust his word."

He strode forward and halted under the gate, laughing at the hate-darkened visage that Zarrono thrust over at him.

"Well, Zarrono," he taunted, "you're a ship shorter than when I last saw you. But you Zingarians were never sailors."

"How did you save your ship, you Messantian gutter-scum?"

"There's a cove some miles to the north, guarded by an arm of



land that broke the force of the gale. I anchored behind it, My anchors dragged, but they held me off the shore."

Zarrono scowled; Valenso said nothing. The count had not known of this cove, for he had done scant exploring of his new domain. Fear of the Picts, lack of curiosity, and the need constantly to drive his people to build and repair and to grow and gather food had kept him and his men near the fort.

"I come to trade," said Strombanni.

"We've nothing to trade with you save sword-strokes," growled Zarrono.

"I think otherwise. You showed your intentions when you murdered and robbed Galaccus, my first mate. Until this morning I supposed that Valenso had the treasure of Tranicos. But if either of you had it, you'd never have gone to the trouble of following me and slaying my mate for the map."

"The map?" cried Zarrono.

"Oh, don't try to dissemble with me! I know you have it. Picts do not wear boots!"

"But," began the count, who then fell silent as Zarrono nudged him.

"If we do have it," said Zarrono, "what have you to trade that we might require?"

"We can talk better within."

A wave of speculation ran along the palisade. Everbody there understood that, however the deal worked out, there was but one ship which could carry only so many.

"Your men shall stay where they are," warned Zarrono.

"Aye. But don't think to seize me for a hostage!" Strombanni laughed grimly. "I demand Valenso's word that I shall be allowed to leave alive and unhurt within the hour, whether we come to terms or not."

"You have my pledge," answered the count.

"Very well, then, open that gate."

The gate opened to admit Strombanni and closed again. The three leaders disappeared into the manor-house while the common men of the various parties resumed their silent surveillance of each other.

On the broad stair, above the great hall, Belesa and Tina crouched, ignored by the men below. Valenso, Galbro, Zarrono, and Strombanni sat about the long table; but for them the hall was empty.

Strombanni gulped wine and set down the empty goblet and began. "We all want the treasure that old Tranicos hid near this bay. Each has something the others need. Valenso has

workers, supplies, and a stockade to shelter us from the Picts. You, Zarrono, have my map. I have a ship."

"What I should like to know," remarked Zarrono, "is this: if you have had that map all these years, why didn't you come sooner after the plunder?"

"I never had it. It was that dog Zorgelitas, who knifed the old miser in the dark and stole the map. But he had neither ship nor crew, and it took him more than a year to get them. When he did come after the treasure the Picts prevented his landing, and his men mutinied and made him sail back to Zingara. One of them stole the map from him and recently sold it to me."

"That was why Zorgelitas recognized the bay," muttered Valenso.

"Did that dog lead you here, Count? I might have guessed it. Where is he?"

"Doubtless in hell, since he was once a buccaneer. The Picts slew him while he was prowling the woods."

"Good!" said Strombanni. "Well, I know nothing of how you knew my mate Galaccus carried the map. I trusted him, and the men trusted him more than they did me, so I let him keep it. This morning he wandered inland, and we found him

sworded to death near the beach, and the map gone. The men were ready to accuse me of slaying him, but I showed the fools that neither my feet nor those of any others of the crew would fit the tracks of boots around the corpse; and Picts wear no boots.

"Now, you have the map, but not the treasure; nor could you hunt it without my leave, nor escape without my ship. Here's my proposal: Zarrono, give me the map; and Valenso, give me fresh meat and other supplies. In return I'll take you three and the Lady Belesa and her girl and set you ashore wherever you like, and give you each a handsome share in the treasure."

The buccaneer looked at Strombanni with a skeptical smile; tugging his mustache. "A fair offer—could one depend upon you to carry it out. What's to prevent us from holding you captive and forcing your men to give us your ship in exchange for you?"

Strombanni laughed. "Do you think I'm such a fool? My men have orders to sail away at the first whiff of treachery. They would never give you the ship if you flayed me alive on the beach. Besides, I have the count's word."

"My pledge is not straw," said

Valenso somberly. "Have done with threats, Zarrono."

Zarrono sat in thought, then said: "Let me take my men on your ship when we sail. I cannot desert my faithful followers—"

Strombanni snorted. "Why not ask for my brand to slit my gullet with? Desert your faithful—bah! You'd desert your mother if you could gain by it. No! You shall not bring enough men aboard to give you a chance to seize my ship."

"Give us a day to think on the matter," urged Zarrono.

Strombanni smote the table, making the wine dance in the goblets. "By Mitra, no! Give me my answer now!"

Zarrono was on his feet, rage submerging his craft. "You Barachan dog! I'll give you your answer—in your guts!"

He threw back his cloak and caught at his sword-hilt. Strombanni heaved up with a roar, his chair crashing over backwards. Valenso sprang up, spreading his arms between the two men as they glowered at one another across the table, blades half drawn. "Gentlemen, have done! Zarrono, he has my pledge—"

"The fiends gnaw your pledge!" snarled Zarrono.

"Stand from between us, my lord," growled the pirate, his voice thick with blood-lust. "You

swore I should not be treacherously intreated. It's no violation thereof for this swine and me to cross swords in equal play."

"Well said, Strom!" They all wheeled open-mouthed at the deep, powerful voice behind them, vibrant with grim amusement. Up on the stair Belesa started with an exclamation.

A tall, powerful man strode out from the hangings that masked a chamber door and advanced upon the table without haste or hesitation. Instantly he dominated the group. For all his size he moved with pantherish suppleness in the high flopping boots that formed part of a curiously old-fashioned Zingaran costume.

"Conan!" cried the freebooters together. Valenso and Galbro caught their breath at that name, though they had never before seen the owner of it.

"Who else?" The giant strode up to the table, laughing sardonically at their amazement.

"What—what do you want here?" stuttered the seneschal. "How did you get here uninvited and unannounced?"

"I climbed the palisade on the east side while you fools were arguing at the gate," the Cimmerian answered, speaking Zingaran with a barbarous accent.

"Every man in the fort was craning his neck westward. I entered the manor while Strombanni was coming in at the gate, and ever since then I've been in yonder chamber, eavesdropping."

"I thought you dead," said Zarrono slowly. "Three years ago the wreck of your ship was seen on a reef off the coast of Shem, and you were heard of on the Main no more."

"'Twill take a bigger ocean than that to drown me," answered Conan. "I swam ashore and tried a spell of mercenarying among the black kingdoms; and since then I've been soldiering for the King of Aquilonia. You might say I have become respectable." He grinned wolfishly. "Or at least that I had until a recent difference with that ass Namedides. And now to business, fellow-thieves."

Up on the stair Tina was clutching Belesa in her excitement. "My lady, it is Conan! Look!"

Belesa was looking, as though she beheld a mythical character in the flesh. Who of all the sea-folk had not heard the wild-blooded tales told of Conan, the rover, who had once captained the Barachan pirates and who was known as one of the greatest scourges of the sea? A score of ballads celebrated his exploits.

Valenso was recovering from the shock of finding a stranger in his hall. "What would you here?" he demanded. "You came from the sea?"

"From the woods." The Cimmerian jerked his head eastward.

"You have been living with the Picts?"

Conan retorted angrily, "Even an effeminate Zingaran should know there's never been peace between Picts and Cimmerians, and never will be. But I've lived among you civilized men long enough to understand your ignorance, and the discourtesy that demands his business of a man who appears at your door out of thousand-mile wilderness. Never mind that." He turned to the glumly staring freebooters. "From what I overheard, I gather there is some dissention over a map."

"None of your affair," said Strombanni.

"Would this be it?" Conan grinned in amusement as he drew from his girdle a crumpled square of parchment, marked with crimson lines.

Strombanni started violently. "My map! Where did you get it?"

"From your mate, Galaccus, the Kothian, when I slew him," answered Conan with grim enjoyment.

"You dog!" raved Stromban-

ni, turning on Zarrono. "You never had the map! You lied—"

"I never said I had it," replied Zarrono. "You deceived yourself. Don't be a fool. Conan is alone; if he had a crew he would already have cut our throats. We'll take the map from him."

"You'll never touch it!" Conan's grin deepened. Stepping back, he crumpled the parchment and cast it into the glowing coals of the fireplace. Both men sprang at him, cursing. Strombanni was met by a buffet under the ear that stretched him half-senseless upon the floor. Zarrono whipped out his sword, but before he could thrust, Conan's own blade beat it out of his hand and sent it spinning across the carpet.

Zarrono staggered against the table, hell in his eyes. Strombanni dragged himself erect, eyes glazed and blood dripping from his bruised ear. Conan leaned across the table, his outstretched broadsword touching Valenso's breast.

"Don't call for your soldiers, Count," said the Cimmerian softly. "Not a sound from you—or from you either, dog-face!" he said to Galbro, who showed no intention of braving his wrath. "The map's ashes and 'twill do no good to spill blood. Sit down, all of you. Or I'll seat you!"

They sank into their chairs sullenly. Conan remained standing, towering over the table.

"You were bargaining," he said. "That's all I've come to do."

"And what have you to trade?" sneered Zarrono.

"Only the treasure of Tranicos."

"*What?*" All four were on their feet again.

"*Sit down!*" roared Conan, banging the table with his blade.

They sank back, tense and white with excitement. Conan grinned in huge enjoyment of the sensation that his words had caused. He continued.

"Yes, I found the treasure before I got the map. That's why I burned the thing. I don't need it, and no one shall ever find the treasure unless I show him where it is."

They stared at him with murder in their eyes.

"You lie," said Zarrono. "For one thing, you came from the woods, yet you say you have not been living with the Picts. But where else could you have been? The nearest outposts of civilization are the Aquilonian settlements hundreds of miles to the east."

"That's where I came from," said Conan imperturbably. "I believe I'm the first white man to cross the Pictish Wilderness.

When I fled from Aquilonia into Pictland I blundered into a party of Picts and slew one, but a stone from a sling knocked me senseless during the *mêlée* and the dogs took me alive. They were Wolfmen and traded me to the Eagle clan for a captured chief of theirs. The Eagles carried me slung from a pole a hundred miles westward to burn me in their chief village, but I slew a few and broke away.

"They kept herding me westward until I shook them off a few days ago, and, by Crom and Ymir, the place where I took refuge turned out to be the treasure cave of old Trancos! Old Trancos and his eleven captains sitting about an ebon table and staring at the hoard, as they've stared for a hundred years! They've shriveled a bit, but otherwise are in fine preservation."

"An uncanny thing," muttered Strombanni.

"What boots it?" said Zarono. "It is the treasure we want. Go on, Conan."

Conan seated himself, filled a goblet, and drank it down. "The first wine since I left Aquilonia, by Crom! Those cursed Eagles hunted me so closely I hardly had time to munch the nuts and roots I found. Sometimes I ate frogs raw, not daring to kindle a fire. I drank only water!"

His impatient hearers informed him profanely that they were not interested in his dietary adventures prior to finding the treasure.

He grinned insolently and resumed. "Well, I was lucky enough to come upon an old boar who disputed the trail with me, and by the time I had eaten him I felt like a whole man again. I saw smoke against the western sky and set out westward, meaning to strike the beach north of where I'd seen the smoke. I was not far from the shore when that storm struck."

Conan looked curiously from face to face. "Do any of you know of the strange drumming sound which began shortly before the storm, seeming to come from somewhere near this fort? A real hide drum, such as the sorcerers of Stygia use to summon—"

Valenso dropped his goblet to the floor suddenly and clutched at his throat, his face livid. Then he caught himself. "N-no," he gasped: "I know nothing of any drum. Continue, Conan."

"Well then, I took shelter in the lee of a rock and waited until it had blown itself out. Then I climbed a tree to look for Picts, and spied your carack, Strombanni and your men pulling in to shore. I was making my way toward your camp on the beach

when I met Galaccus. Well, I had an old score to settle with him, and I settled it."

"What had he done to you?" demanded Strombanni.

"Oh, years ago when I sailed with the Zingaran buccaneers, this Galaccus was one of the company, and had the gall to steal a wench of mine. One Sancha. I should never have known he had a map, had he not tried to eat it ere he died.

"I recognized it for what it was and was considering what use to make of it when you and the rest of your dogs came up and found the body. I was lying in a thicket not a dozen yards from you while you were arguing with your men over the matter. I judged the time was not ripe for me to show myself!" He laughed at the rage in Strombanni's face. "Well, when I heard you say that Zarrono must have done the deed and taken the chart, and that you meant to go parley with him, seeking a chance to murder him and get it back—"

"Cur!" snarled Zarrono.

Strombanni laughed mirthlessly. "D'you think I'd play fair with a treacherous dog like you? Go on, Conan."

The Cimmerian grinned. "Nothing much, then. I came through the woods while you tacked along the coast, and

raised the fort ere you did. Your guess that the storm had wrecked Zarrono's ship was a good one. So there's the tale. I have the treasure, Strombanni has a ship, Valenso has supplies. By Crom, Zarrono, I don't see where you fit the scheme, but to avoid strife I'll include you. My proposal is this: We'll split the treasure four ways. Strombanni and I shall sail away with our shares aboard the *Red Hand*. You and Valenso take yours and remain lords of the wilderness, or build a ship out of tree-trunks, as you wish."

Valenso blanched and Zarrono swore. The latter said: "Are you fool enough to go aboard the *Red Hand* alone with Strombanni? He'll cut your throat ere you're out of sight of land!"

Conan laughed heartily. "This is like the problem of how to get the sheep, the wolf, and the cabbage across the river without their devouring each other!"

"And that appeals to your Cimmerian sense of humor?" said Zarrono.

"I will not stay here!" cried Valenso, a wild gleam in his dark eyes. "Treasure or no treasure, I must go!"

Conan gave him a slit-eyed glance. "Well then, how about this plan? We divide the loot as I suggested. Then Strombanni

sails away with Zarrono, Valenso, and such members of the count's household as he may select, leaving me in command of the fort, the rest of Valenso's men, and all of Zarrono's. I'll build my own ship."

Zarrono looked sick. "I have the choice of remaining here in exile, or abandoning my crew and going aboard the *Red Hand* to be murdered?"

Conan's laughter rang gustily through the hall as he smoke Zarrono jovially on the back, ignoring the black murder in the buccaneer's glare. "That's it, Zarrono! Stay here while Strombanni and I sail away, or sail away with Strombanni, leaving your men with me."

"I had rather have Zarrono," said Strombanni. "You'd turn my own men against me, Conan, and feed me to the fish ere I raised the Barachas."

Sweat dripped from Zarrono's face. "Neither I nor the count nor his niece will reach land alive if we ship with that devil. You are both in my power; my men surround this hall. What's to prevent my cutting you both down?"

"Not a thing," Conan admitted cheerfully, "except that if you do, Strombanni's men will sail away leaving you here where the Picts will presently cut all your throats. With me dead

you'll never find the treasure; and finally if you try to summon your men I'll split your skull down to the chin."

Conan laughed as he spoke, but Belesa sensed that he meant what he said. His naked sword lay across his knees, and Zarrono's sword lay across the room out of the buccaneer's reach. Galbro was not a fighter, and Valenso seemed incapable of decision.

"Aye!" said Strombanni. "You would find the two of us no easy prey. I'm agreeable to Conan's proposal. What say you, Valenso?"

"I must leave this coast!" whispered the count. "I must go—go far—and quickly!"

Strombanni frowned, puzzled at the count's manner, then turned to Zarrono. "And you, Zarrono?"

"What can I say? Let me take my three officers and forty men aboard the *Red Hand*, and the bargain's made."

"The officers and thirty men!"

"Very well."

"Done!"

There was no handshaking or drinking of toasts to seal the bargain. The two captains glared at each other like hungry wolves. The count plucked at his mustache with a trembling hand, rapt in his own somber thoughts.

Conan stretched, drank, and grinned on the group with a grin like that of a stalking tiger.

"Lead us to the treasure!" demanded Zarrono.

"Wait a bit," answered Conan. "We must keep our power evenly balanced, so one cannot take advantage of the other. We'll work it thus: Strombanni's men shall come ashore, all but a half-dozen who shall take the ship out of reach of either party, and camp on the beach. Zarrono's men shall come out of the fort and likewise camp on the strand, so that each crew can watch the other. Valenso's men shall stay in the fort but leave the gate open. Will you come with us, Count?"

"Go into that forest?" Valenso shuddered and drew his cloak about him. "Not for all the gold of Tranicos!"

"Very well. 'Twill take about thirty men to carry the loot, so let us take fifteen from each crew and start forthwith."

Belesa saw Zarrono and Strombanni shoot furtive glances at one another, and wondered how Conan could have overlooked the fatal weakness in his plan. Perhaps he was too arrogantly confident in his personal prowess. But she knew that he would never come out of the forest alive. Once the treasure was in their grasp, the others would

form a rogue's alliance long enough to rid themselves of the man they both hated. She shuddered, staring morbidly at the man whom she knew to be already doomed.

The whole situation was pregnant with bloody portents. Zarrono would trick and kill Strombanni if he could, and Strombanni had already marked Zarrono and her uncle for death, and no doubt herself for a fate hardly better. If Zarrono won the battle of wits the Korzettas' lives were safe, but looking at the buccaneer she could hardly decide whether death would be more abhorrent than he.

"How far is it?" asked Strombanni.

"If we start within the hour we can be back before midnight." Conan emptied his goblet, rose, and glanced at the count. "Valenso, are you mad, to kill a Pict in his hunting paint?"

Valenso started. "What do you mean?"

"Do you mean to say you don't know your men slew a Pict hunter in the woods last night?"

The count shook his head. "Not one of my men was in the woods last night."

"Well, somebody was," grunted the Cimmerian, fumbling in his girdle. "I saw the head nailed to a tree at the edge of the for-

est. He wasn't painted for war. I found no boot-tracks, from which I judged that it had been fastened up before the storm. But there were moccasin-tracks, so Picts had seen it. They were men of some other clan or they'd have taken it down. If they're at peace with the dead man's clan, they'll make tracks to his village to tell his tribe."

"Perhaps they slew him," suggested Valenso.

"No; but they know who did, for the same reason I do. This chain was knotted about the stump of the neck. You must have been utterly mad, to identify your work like that." He tossed on to the table the gold seal-chain that the count had worn about his neck. "I know the Korzetta seal. That chain would tell any Pict it was the work of a foreigner."

Valenso lurched up, choking, as his hand flew to his throat, then sank back speechless, staring at the chain as if it were a venomous serpent.

Conan scowled at him and glanced questioningly at the others. Zarrono made a quick gesture to indicate that the count was not quite right in the head. Conan sheathed his sword and picked up his hat.

"Let's go," he said.

The captains gulped their wine and rose. Zarrono laid a

hand on Valenso's arm and shook him slightly. The count started and stared about him, then followed the others out like a man in a daze, the chain dangling from his fingers. But not all left the hall.

Belesa and Tina, peeping between the bannisters, saw Galbro fall behind the others, loitering until the door closed behind them. Then he hurried to the fireplace, sank to his knees, and peered for a long space. At last he got up and stole out of the hall by another door.

Tina whispered: "What did Galbro find in the fire?"

Belesa shook her head, then rose and went down to the empty hall. An instant later she was kneeling where the seneschal had knelt.

She saw the charred remnant of the map that Conan had thrown into the fire. It was ready to crumble at a touch, but faint lines and bits of writing were still discernible upon it. Though she could not read the writing, she could trace the outlines of what seemed to be a picture of a steep hill or crag, surrounded by marks evidently representing a forest through which wound trails and streams. From Galbro's actions she believed that he recognized the topographical features represented; the seneschal had explored in-

land farther than any man in the settlement.

She shrugged. Let him follow after the treasure. One more would make no difference.

VI

The Plunder of the Dead

The fortress stood quiet in the noonday heat. Voices within the stockade sounded muffled. The same drowsy stillness reigned on the beach where the rival crews camped in armed suspicion a few hundred yards apart. Far out in the bay the *Red Hand* rode gently at anchor with a handful of men aboard, ready to snatch her out of reach at the first sign of treachery.

Belesa came down the stairs and paused at the sight of Count Valenso seated at the table, fingering the broken chain. He seemed to be locked up in a grim world all his own, with a fear that flogged all human characteristics out of him.

She spoke in a harsh, strained voice. "The barbarian has led the captains into the forest. When they have the gold they'll slay him. But when they return with the treasure, what then? Are we to board the ship? Can we trust Strombanni?"

Valenso shook his head. "He would murder us all for our

shares of the loot. But Zarrono whispered his intentions to me. He will see that night overtakes the treasure-hunters so they shall be forced to camp in the forest. He will find a way to kill Strombanni and his men in their sleep. Then the buccaneers will come stealthily to the beach. Before dawn I will send some of my fishermen to swim secretly out to the ship and seize her. Zarrono will come out of the forest, and he will lead his men and I mine to fall upon the pirates in the dark, who without their captain will be easy prey. Then we shall sail in Strombanni's ship with all the treasure."

"And what of me?"

"I have promised you to Zarrono. But for my promise he would not take us off."

"I will never wed him," she cried fiercely.

"You shall," he responded gloomily and without sympathy. "You have no choice."

"I'll murder him in his bed some night."

"That is your affair, so that you wait until we are out of this trap." He lifted the chain. "I must have dropped it on the sand. *He* has been that near—on the beach . . ."

"You did not drop it on the sand," said Belesa in a voice as merciless as his own. "You tore it from your throat last night in

the hall when you flogged Tina. I saw it gleaming on the floor before I left the hall."

He looked up gray-faced. Belesa laughed bitterly. "Yes! The black man was here! In this hall! He must have found the chain on the floor. The guardsmen did not see him, but I did, padding along the upper hallway past your door."

For an instant she thought that he would drop dead of sheer terror. He sank back in his chair, the chain slipping from his fingers and jingling to the floor.

"In the manor!" he whispered. "I thought bolts and bars and armed guards could keep him out, fool that I was! At my very door!" he shrieked, tearing at the collar of his doublet as if it strangled him. "Why does he not end it? I dream of waking in my darkened chamber to see him crouching over me . . . I understand; he plays with me, as a cat with a mouse. To have slain me last night were too merciful. So he destroyed the ship wherein I might have fled; he slew the wretched Pict and left my chain upon him, that the savages might blame me . . ."

The paroxysm passed, leaving him faint and trembling like a storm-tossed leaf.

"Who is this dark man?" asked

Belesa, fear crawling along her spine.

"A demon loosed by my greed and lust to plague me throughout eternity!" he whispered, spreading his long thin fingers on the table and staring at her with hollow eyes that seemed not to see her at all, but to look through her to some dim distant doom.

"In my youth I had an enemy at court," he said, as if speaking more to himself than to her. "A powerful man who stood between me and my ambition. In my avidity for wealth and power I sought aid from the people of the black arts—a sorcerer who, at my desire, raised up a fiend from the outer gulfs of existence. It crushed and slew my enemy; I grew great and wealthy and none could stand before me. But I sought to cheat the wizard of his price.

"He was Thoth-Amon of the Ring, in exile from his native Stygia. He had fled in the reign of King Mentupherra, and when Mentupherra died and Ctesphon ascended the ivory throne of Luxur, Thoth-Amon lingered in Kordava though he might have returned home, dunning me for the debt I owed him. But instead of paying him the moiety of my gains as I had promised, I denounced him to my own monarch, so that Thoth-Amon must

needs willy-nilly return to Stygia in haste and stealth. There he found favor and waxed in wealth and magical might until he was the virtual ruler of the land.

"Two years ago in Kordava, word came to me that Thoth-Amon had vanished from his accustomed haunts in Stygia. And then one night I saw his brown devil's face leering at me from the shadows in my castle hall.

"It was not his material body, but his spirit sent to plague me. This time I had no king to protect me, for upon the death of Ferdrugo and the setting up of the regency the land, as you know, had fallen into factional strife. Before Thoth-Amon could reach Kordava in the flesh, I sailed to put broad seas between me and him. But now this fiend has tracked me down by his uncanny powers even here in this vast wilderness.

"He is too crafty to be trapped or slain as one would do with a common man. When he hides, no man can find him. He steals like a shadow through the night, making nothing of bolts and bars. He blinds the eyes of guardsmen with sleep. He can command the spirits of the air, the serpents of the deep, and the fiends of the night; he can raise storms to sink ships and throw down the finest castles . . ."

The weird eyes lit palely as Valenso gazed beyond the tapestried walls to far invisible horizons. "I'll trick him yet," he whispered. "Let him delay to strike this night, and dawn shall find me with a ship under my heels, and again I'll cast an ocean between me and his vengeance."

"Hell's fire!" Conan stopped, glaring upward. Behind him the seamen halted in two compact clumps, bows in their hands and suspicion in their faces. They were following an old Pictish trail eastward, and though they had progressed but thirty yards the beach was no longer visible.

"Why do you stop?" demanded Strombanni.

"Are you blind? Look there!"

From a thick branch that overhung the trail a bodiless head leered down at them—a dark painted face framed in thick black hair, a hornbill feather drooping over the left ear.

"I hid that head in the bushes," stated Conan, scanning the woods. "What fool could have stuck it back up? Somebody is fiendishly intent on bringing the Picts down upon the settlement."

Men glanced at each other darkly, a new element of suspicion added to the already seeth-

ing cauldron. Conan climbed the tree, brought down the head, and carried it into the woods where he threw it into a stream.

"If I read those moccasin-prints aright," he explained, returning, "those were Cormorants about the tree. Unless they're having a war with the Hornbills they'll run to the Hornbill village, and there'll be trouble. That's the worst insult possible to a Pict—slay a man not in war-paint and stick his head up in a tree for the crows to eat."

Men uneasily loosened blades in their scabbards and shafts in their quivers as they strode deeper into the forest. The path wound and twisted until most of them lost their sense of direction. Conan kept scanning the trail and finally grunted.

"Who's this fellow hurrying ahead of us in boots? Has either of you wolves sent a man on ahead of us?"

Both Strombanni and Zarrono vehemently disclaimed any such act, glaring at each other with mutual disbelief. Conan quickened his pace and they hurried after him. When the path veered northward Conan left it and began threading his way through the trees in a southeasterly direction. The afternoon wore on as the sweating men plowed through bushes and climbed over logs along the rude trail.

Strombanni, falling behind momentarily with Zarrono, murmured, "D'you think he is leading us into ambush?"

"He might," retorted the buccancer. "In any case we shall never safely find our way back to the sea without his guidance." And Zarrono gave Strombanni a meaningful look.

"I see your point. This may force a change in our plans."

Time passed and suspicion almost reached the panic-point. Then the party emerged from the thick woods and saw just ahead of them a gaunt crag that jutted up from the forest floor. A path from the east ran through a cluster of boulders and wound up the crag on a ladder of stony shelves to a flat ledge near the summit of the cliff.

Conan halted. "That is the trail I followed; it leads up to a cave behind that ledge. In that cave are the bodies of Trancos and his captains, and the treasure he plundered from Maatneb. But a word before we go up after it: No treachery, or you will never find your way back to the beach alive. You're lost in these deep woods, and it would take you days to fight your way back to the shore steering by the sun. And I don't think that these woods will be very safe for

white men when the Hornbills learn about their hunter."

He laughed at the momentary consternation with which they greeted his recognition of their intentions toward him. "All of you stay here save Strombanni and Zarrono," he continued. "We three are enough to pack the treasure down from the cave."

Strombanni said, "Go up there alone with you and Zarrono? Do you take me for a fool? One man at least comes with me!"

He designated his boatswain, a brawny, hard-faced giant, naked to his broad leather belt, with gold hoops in his ears and a crimson scarf around his head.

"And my executioner comes with me!" growled Zarrono, beckoning to a lean sea-thief with a face like a parchment-covered skull, who carried a two-handed scimitar naked over his shoulder.

Conan shrugged. "Very well. Follow me."

They followed close on his heels as he strode up the winding path and scrambled up to the ledge. They crowded behind as he passed into the cleft and down the tunnel, their breath sucking in greedily as he called their attention to the iron-bound chests on either side.

"A rich cargo here," he said carelessly. "Silks, laces, garments, ornaments, weapons—the

loot of the southern seas. But the real treasure lies beyond that door."

Conan frowned upon seeing the massive door partly open. He did not say so, but he distinctly remembered closing it before he left the cavern.

They looked into a wide chamber, lit by a strange blue glow that glimmered through a smoky haze. A great ebony table stood in the midst of the cavern, and in a carven chair with a high back and broad arms, that might once have stood in the castle of some Zingaran baron, sat a giant figure, fabulous and fantastic. There sat Bloody Trancos, his great head sunk on his bosom, in his gilt-embroidered tunic from which precious stones winked in the blue flame, his flaring boots and the gold-worked baldric that upheld a jewel-hilted sword in a golden sheath.

Ranging the board sat the eleven captains, their lips shriveled away to expose their teeth in fixed, ghastly grins. The blue fire played weirdly upon them and upon their giant admiral as it flowed from the enormous jewel on the tiny ivory pedestal, striking glints of frozen fire from the heaps of fantastically-cut gems that shone before the place of Trancos—the plunder

of Khemi, the jewels of Maat-neb! The stones whose value was greater than the value of all the rest of the known jewels in the world put together!

The faces of Zarrono and Strombanni showed pallid in the blue glow. Over their shoulders their men gaped.

"Go in and take them," invited Conan, drawing aside.

Zarrono and Strombanni jostled past him, their followers close behind. Zarrono kicked the door wide open—and halted with one foot on the threshold at the sight of a figure on the floor, previously hidden by the partly closed door. It was a man, prone and contorted, his head drawn back between his shoulders at an unnatural angle.

"Galbro!" exclaimed Zarrono. "Dead! What—" With sudden suspicion he thrust his head over the threshold, then jerked back, shouting: "There's death within!"

Even as he yelled, the blue mist swirled and condensed. At the same time Conan hurled his weight against the four men bunched in the doorway, sending them staggering—but not headlong into the misty cavern as he had planned. Suspecting a trap, they were recoiling from the sight of the dead man and the materializing demon, and his violent shove, while it threw

them off their feet, yet failed of its intent. Strombanni and Zarrono sprawled half over the threshold on their knees, the boatswain tumbled over their legs, and the executioner caromed against the wall.

Before Conan could follow up his intention of kicking the fallen men into the cavern and holding the door against them until the supernatural horror within had done its work, he had to turn and defend himself against the fronting onslaught of the executioner who was the first to regain his balance and his wits.

The buccaneer made a tremendous swipe with his headsmen's sword. Conan ducked and the great blade banged against the stone wall, spattering blue sparks. The next instant the executioner's skull-faced head rolled on the cavern floor under the bite of Conan's broadsword.

In the seconds consumed by this swift action, the boatswain regained his feet and fell upon the Cimmerian, raining blows. Sword met sword with a deafening ring of steel. Meanwhile the two captains, terrified of they knew not what in the cavern, scuttled back out of the doorway so quickly that the demon had not fully materialized before they were withdrawn

over the magical boundary and out of its reach. By the time they rose to their feet, reaching for their swords, the monster had diffused again into blue mist.

Meanwhile Conan, hotly engaged with the boatswain, slashed and thrust in a furious effort to cut the man down before help came to him. But though wounded in half a dozen places the pirate beat off the Cimmerian's attack, bellowing for his companions. Before Conan could finish him, the two chiefs came murderously at the Cimmerian with their swords.

Conan bounded back and leaped onto the ledge. Though he felt himself a match for all three men, he did not wish to be trapped by the crews which would come charging up the path at the sound of the battle.

These were not coming as fast as he had expected, however. Though aroused by the muffled sounds from the cavern, none dared start up the path for fear of a blade in his back. Each band faced the other tensely, hands on weapons. When they saw the Cimmerian bound out on to the ledge they still hesitated. While they stood, Conan ran up the ladder of handholds niched in the rock near the cleft and himself prone on the summit of the crag out of their sight.

The captains stormed out upon the ledge, raving and waving their swords. "Dog!" screamed Zarrono. "You planned to trap and slay us! Traitor."

Conan mocked them from above. "What did you expect? You two planned to slit my waist as soon as I had got the plunder for you. Had it not been for that fool Galbro I should have trapped the four of you, and explained to your men how you rushed in heedlessly to your doom."

"And with us both dead, you'd have taken my ship and all the loot too!" frothed Strombanni.

"Why not? It was Galbro's prints I saw on the trail, though I don't understand how the ass learned of the cave, or how he expected to bear away the loot by himself."

"But for the sight of his body we should have walked into that death-trap," said Zarrono, his swarthy face still ashy.

"What was it?" said Strombanni. "Some poisonous mist?"

"Nay, it writhed like a live thing and came together in some fiendish form ere we backed out. It was some evil bound to the cave by a spell."

"Well, what are you going to do?" yelled their unseen tormentor.

"What shall we do? Zarrono

asked Strombanni. "The cavern cannot be entered."

"You cannot get the treasure," Conan assured them from his eyrie. "The demon will strangle you. It nearly slew me when I stepped in there."

"Summon up the men!" yelled Strombanni. "We'll climb up and hew him down!"

"Don't be a fool!" snarled Zarrono. "Do you think any man on earth could climb those handholds against his sword? We'll have the men up here, right enough, to feather him with arrows if he shows himself. But we'll get those gems yet. He has some plan for obtaining the loot or he'd never have brought thirty men to bear it back. We'll bend a pike-head to make a hook, thrust it into the room, and drag the table up to the door."

"Well thought, Zarrono!" came Conan's voice. "Just what I had in mind. But how will you get back to the beach? 'Twill be dark long before you can feel your way through the woods, and I'll follow you and slay you one by one in the dark."

"That's no empty boast," said Strombanni. "He can move and strike in the dark like a ghost."

"Then we'll slay him here," said Zarrono. "Some of us shall shoot to keep him back from the edge while others climb the crag. Listen! Why does he laugh?"

"To hear dead men plotting," said Conan.

"Forget him," said Zarrono, and shouted for the men below to come on up.

The sailors started up the trail. There came a hum like that of an angry bee, ending in a sharp thud. A man gasped and blood gushed from his mouth. He sank to his knees, a black-feathered shaft protruding from his back. A yell of alarm went up from his companions.

"Picts!" bawled a pirate, lifting his bow and loosing blindly. More arrows whizzed.

"Take cover, fools!" shrieked Zarrono, who had glimpsed painted figures moving in the bushes.

Another man on the path fell, tumbling over and over down the steep slope with an arrow through his body. The rest scrambled hastily down among the rocks at the foot of the crag. Those on the ledge above lay prone.

"We're trapped!" said Strombanni, pale. Bold enough with a deck under his feet, he was shaken by this silent half-seen warfare.

"Conan said they feared this crag," said Zarrono. "When night falls the men must climb up here. The Picts will not rush us." He sounded not too sure.

"Nay," mocked Conan above them. "They'll not climb the crag to get you; they'll just surround it and keep you here until you die of thirst!"

"He speaks truth," said Zarrono. "What now?"

"Make a truce with him," muttered Strombanni. "If any can save us he can. Time enough to cut his throat later." Lifting his voice he called, "Conan, let's bury our feud for the nonce. You're in this as much as we; come down and help us out before we all perish."

"How so? I have only to wait till dark, climb down the other side of this crag, and melt into the forest. I can crawl through the Pict's line, return to the fort, and report you all slain by savages—which will soon be the truth!"

Zarrono and Strombanni stared at one another mutely.

"But I won't do that!" Conan roared. "Not for love of you dogs, but because I hate Picts too bitterly to give them the pleasure of slaughtering any band of white men, even my enemies!" The Cimmerian's head appeared over the crest of the crag. "Now attend. That's only a small band down there, probably a group of fleet young bucks sent on ahead of a main war-party. They've thrown a line around the west side of the crag,

but I think there is none on the east side. I shall go down that side, get into the forest, and work around behind them. Meanwhile you crawl down the path and join your men among the rocks. Tell them to unstring their bows and draw their swords. When you hear me yell, rush the trees on the west side of the clearing."

"What of the treasure?"

"To hell with the treasure! We shall be lucky to get out with our heads on our shoulders!"

The black-maned head vanished. The men on the ledge listened for sounds of Conan's movements, but heard nothing. At last Strombanni, Zarrono, and the boatswain started down the path. The boatswain, already half dead from his wounds, moved slowly and with pain. Halfway down the black shafts began to whisper up. The boatswain groaned and toppled limply down the slope, an arrow through his heart; other arrows shivered on the helmets and breastplates of the men as they bounded down the remaining distance in frantic haste. They reached the foot and lay panting among the boulders.

"Is this more of Conan's trickery?" wondered Zarrono.

"We can trust him in this matter," asserted Strombanni.

"He lives by his own peculiar code of honor, and he'll help us against the Picts even though he plans to murder us himself—hark!"

A blood-freezing yell came from the woods to the west, and an object arched out of the trees, struck the ground, and rolled towards the rocks—a human head, its hideously painted face relaxed in death.

"Conan's signal!" roared Strombanni, and the desperate freebooters rose like a wave from the rocks and rushed headlong towards the woods. Arrows whirred out of the bushes, but their flight was erratic and only one man fell.

Then the wild men of the sea plunged through the fringe of foliage and fell upon the naked painted figures that rose out of the gloom before them. There was a murderous instant of panting, hand-to-hand effort as swords beat down war-hatchets and booted feet trampled naked bodies. Then the survivors of the Picts fled headlong, leaving seven of their number stretched out among the blood-stained leaves.

Conan strode into view, hat gone, tunic torn, and sword dripping. Zarrono exploded into curses as the Cimmerian passed his sword through a buccaneer

who writhed on the ground with a broken hip.

"We cannot carry him," explained Conan, "and it would be no kindness to leave him for the Picts to take alive. Come on!"

He trotted through the trees, leading them as unerringly as if he followed a blazed trail. Some time later the rovers shouted with relief as they burst upon the trail to the beach. One of them broke into a run, but Conan seized him by the shoulder and hurled him back among his companions.

"Fool!" he growled. "Save your breath; we may have to sprint the last mile." And he set off down the trail at a steady jog-trot.

The sun touched the waves of the Western Ocean. Tina stood at the window from which Belesa had watched the storm.

"Look!" shrilled the girl. "Men are running out of the forest!"

Figures, small in the distance, were streaming out of the woods.

"The sailors!" gasped Belesa. "And empty-handed! I see Zarrono—and Strombanni—"

"Where is Conan?" whispered Tina. "And listen! The Picts!"

A vast ululation of blood-lust rose from the dark woods. The sound spurred on the panting men reeling toward the palisade.

The sailors on the strand, grasping the significance of that wild howling, abandoned their suppers and fled for the gate of the stockade. A heaving mob flowed through the opening, and then the gate was slammed and barred. The sailors climbed up to the parapet to join the men-at-arms already there.

Belesa, who had hurried down from the manor, asked Zarrono, "Where is Conan?"

The buccaneer jerked a thumb toward the blackening woods. His chest heaved and sweat poured from his face. "Their scouts were at our heels before we gained the beach. He paused to slay a few to give us time to get away."

He staggered away to take his place on the parapet, whither Strombanni had already mounted. Valenso stood there, a somber, cloak-wrapped figure, silent and aloof.

"Look!" cried a pirate above the howling of the unseen horde approaching.

A man emerged from the forest and raced across the clearing.

"Conan!" Zarrono grinned wolfishly. "We're safe and we know where the treasure is. Why not riddle him with arrows now?"

"Nay!" Strombanni caught

his arm. "We shall need every blade. Look!"

Behind the fleet Cimmerian a wild howling horde of naked Picts burst from the forest, hundreds and hundreds of them. Their arrows rained about the Cimmerian. A few strides more and Conan reached the eastern wall of the stockade, bounded high, seized the points of the logs, and heaved himself up and over, his sword in his teeth. Arrows thudded into the logs where his body had been.

"Stop them!" he roared as his feet struck the ledge inside. "If they get to the wall we're lost!"

The defenders responded instantly, and a storm of arrows and quarrels tore into the oncoming horde. Conan saw Belesa with Tina clinging to her hand. His language was picturesque.

"Get back in the manor," he commanded finally. "Their arrows will arch over the wall—like that!" A black shaft struck the earth at Belesa's feet. Conan caught up a longbow and mounted the parapet. "Some of you men prepare torches!" he roared. "We cannot fight them in the dark!"

The sun had sunk in a welter of blood. Out in the bay the men aboard the carack had hoisted anchor, and the *Red Hand* was fast receding toward the crimson of the horizon.

VII

Men Of The Woods

Night had fallen, but torches cast their light across the strand, throwing the mad scene into lurid clarity. Naked men in paint swarmed the beach. Like waves they came against the palisade, bared teeth and blazing eyes gleamed in the glare of torches along the wall. Hornbill feathers waved in black top-knots, together with the feathers of the cormorant and the osprey. A few warriors, the wildest of them all, wore sharks' teeth woven into their tangled locks. The sea-land tribes had gathered from up and down the coast to rid their country of the civilized invaders.

They surged against the palisade, driving a storm of arrows before them, fighting into the teeth of the shafts and bolts that tore into their masses from the stockade. Sometimes they came so close to the wall that they were hewing at the gate with their axes, thrusting their spears through the loopholes, and setting the trunks of small trees against the wall for scaling-ladders. But each time the tide ebbed without overflowing the barrier, leaving its drift of dead and wounded. At this kind of fighting the free-booters of

the sea were at their stoutest. Their missiles tore holes in the charging hordes, and their swords hewed the wild men from the palisade that they strove to scale.

Yet again and again the men of the woods returned to the onslaught with all the stubborn ferocity that had been aroused in their fierce hearts.

"They are like mad dogs!" gasped Zarrono, hacking down at dark hands that grasped at the palisade points and the dark faces that snarled up at him.

"If we can hold out till dawn they'll lose heart," grunted Conan, splitting a feathered skull with professional skill. "These savages have no guts for a long siege. Look, they fall back now."

The last charge rolled back. The men on the wall shook the sweat out of their eyes, counted their dead, and took a fresh grip on the blood-slippery hilts of their swords. Like blood-hungry wolves the Picts skulked beyond the ring of torchlight; only the bodies of the slain lay before the palisade.

"Have they gone?" said Strombanni, shaking his tawny locks. The sword in his hand was notched and red, and his brawny bare arm was splashed with blood, some of it his.

"They're still out yonder." Conan nodded toward the outer darkness where he glimpsed movements and the glitter of eyes and the red glint of copper weapons. "They've drawn off for a bit, though. Put a sentry on each of the walls, and let the rest eat and drink. 'Tis past midnight, and we've been fighting for hours without respite. Ha, Valenso, how goes the battle with you?"

The count, in dented, blood-splashed helm and cuirass, with his left arm bandaged, moved somberly up to where Conan and the captains stood. For answer he muttered something inaudible under his breath. And then out of the darkness a voice spoke—a loud clear voice that rang through the entire fort.

"Count Valenso! Count Valenso of Korzetta! Do you hear me?" It spoke with a Stygian accent.

Conan heard the count gasp as if he had been stricken by a mortal wound. Valenso reeled and grasped the tops of the logs of the stockade, his face pale in the torchlight. The voice resumed:

"It is I, Thoth-Amon of the Ring! Did you think to flee me once more? It is too late for that! All your schemes shall avail you naught, for tonight I

shall send a messenger to you. It is the demon that guarded the treasure of Trancos, whom I have released from his cave and bound to my service. He will inflict upon you the doom that you, you dog, have earned: a death at once slow, hard, and disgraceful. Let us see you mulct your way out of that!"

The speech ended in a peal of musical laughter. Valenso gave a scream of terror, jumped down from the parapet and ran staggering up the slope toward the manor.

There was a lull in the fighting as Tina watched from Belesa's window. Belesa, going over beside her to look out, shuddered at the sight.

"I am afraid," murmured Tina. "I hope Strombanni and Zarrono are slain."

"And not Conan?"

"He would not hurt us."

"You are wise beyond your years, Tina."

"Look!" Tina pointed. "The sentry is gone from the south wall! He was there a moment ago; now he has vanished."

From their window the points of the south side of the palisade were just visible over the roofs of a row of huts which paralleled that wall for most of its length. The huts, occupied by peasants, left a four-foot-wide

corridor between their backs and the palisade.

"Where could the sentry have gone?" whispered Tina uneasily, and her fears were communicated to Belesa.

"Where is the count?" asked the latter.

"In the great hall, my lady. He sits alone at the table, wrapped in his cloak and drinking wine." Tina paused. "We ought to tell him about the sentry, ought we not?"

Before Belesa could reply, Tina scampered out the door.

"Tina—" began Belesa. She rose, hearing the patter of Tina's slippers receding down the stair. Then abruptly there rang a scream of such terror that Belesa's heart almost stopped.

She was out of the chamber and flying down the corridor before she was aware that her limbs were in motion. She ran down the stair—and halted as if turned to stone.

She did not scream as Tina had; she could not. She saw Tina and was aware of small hands grasping her frantically. These were the only sane realities in a scene of black nightmare and lunacy and death, dominated by the monstrous anthropomorphic shadow that spread awful arms against the smoke and the lurid glare.

Out in the stockade Strombanni shook his head at Conan's question. "I heard nothing."

"I did!" Conan's suspicions were aroused; he stood tensely. "It came from the south wall, behind those huts!"

Drawing his broadsword, he strode in the direction that he had indicated. From the compound, the south wall and the sentry posted there were not visible, being hidden behind the huts. Strombanni followed.

At the mouth of the open space between the huts and the wall Conan halted warily. The space was dimly lighted by torches flaring at either corner of the stockade. About midway down that corridor a shape sprawled.

"Ottandro!" swore Strombanni, running forward and dropping to one knee beside the figure. "By Mitra, his throat's been cut from ear to ear."

Conan swept the space with a quick glance, finding it empty save for himself, Strombanni, and the corpse. He peered through a loophole. No living man moved within the ring of torchlight outside the fort.

"Who could have done this?" he wondered.

"Zarrono!" Strombanni sprang up, spitting fury, his face convulsed. "He has set his thieves to stabbing my men in

the back! He plans to wipe me out by treachery! Devils! I am leagued within and without!"

"Wait!" Conan reached a restraining hand. "I do not believe Zarrono has done this! the Picts—"

The maddened pirate jerked away and rushed around the end of the hut-row. Conan ran after him, swearing. Strombanni made straight for the fire by which Zarrono's tall lean form was visible as the buccaneer chief quaffed a jack of ale.

Strombanni violently dashed the jack from his hand, splattering his breastplate with foam, and jerked him around to confront the passion-twisted face of the pirate captain.

"You murdering dog!" yelled Strombanni. "Will you slay my men behind my back while they fight for your filthy hide as well as mine?"

Conan was hurrying toward them. On all sides men ceased eating and drinking to stare in amazement.

"What do you mean?" sputtered Zarrono.

"You've set your men to stabbing mine at their posts!" screamed the maddened Barachan.

"You lie!" Smoldering hate burst into flame.

With a howl Strombanni heaved up his sword to cut at

the buccaneer's unhelmeted head. Zarrono caught the blow on his armored left arm, and sparks flew as he staggered back, ripping out his own sword.

In an instant the captains were fighting like madmen, their blades flaming and flashing in the firelight. Their crews reacted instantly; a deep roar went up as pirates and buccaneers drew their swords and fell upon one another. The men left on the walls abandoned their posts and leaped down into the stockade, blades in hand. In an instant the compound was a battleground where writhing knots of men smote and slew in a blind frenzy. Some of Valenso's men-at-arms and toilers were drawn into the mêlée, and the soldiers at the gate turned and stared in amazement, forgetting the foe outside.

It had all happened so quickly that men were fighting all over the compound before Conan could separate the maddened chiefs. Ignoring their swords, he tore them apart with such violence that they staggered backward. Zarrono caught his heel and fell.

"You cursed fools, would you throw away all our lives?"

Strombanni was frothing and Zarrono was bawling for assistance. A buccaneer ran at Conan

from behind and cut at his head. The Cimmerian half turned and caught his arm, checking the stroke in midair.

"Look, you fools!" he roared, pointing with his sword.

Something in his tone caught the attention of the battlecrazed mob. Men froze in their places and twisted their heads to stare. Conan was pointing to a soldier on the firing-ledge. The sergeant was reeling, clawing the air, and choking as he tried to shout. He pitched headlong to the ground, and all saw the black arrow standing out from between his shoulders.

A cry of alarm rose from the compound. On the heels of the shout came a clamor of blood-freezing screams and the impact of axes on the gate. Flaming arrows arched over the wall and stuck in logs, whence thin wisps of blue smoke curled upward. Then from behind the huts that ranged the south wall came swift and furtive figures racing across the compound.

"The Picts are in!" shouted Conan.

Bedlam followed his shout. The freebooters ceased their feud. Some turned to meet the savages; some sprang back to the wall. Picts poured from behind the huts and over the compound; their axes clashed against the swords of the sailors

and the bucklers of the sergeants.

Zarrono was struggling to his feet when a painted savage brained him from behind with a war-ax.

Conan, with a clump of sailors behind him, was battling with the Picts inside the stockade, and Strombanni with most of his men was climbing up on the parapet, slashing at the dark figures already swarming over the wall. The Picts, who had crept up while the defenders were fighting among themselves, were attacking from all sides. Valenso's soldiers clustered at the gate, trying to hold it against a howling swarm of demons who thundered against it from outside with a tree-trunk.

More and more savages streamed from behind the huts, having scaled the undefended south wall. Strombanni and his pirates were beaten back from the other sides of the palisade, and in an instant the compound was swarming with naked warriors. They dragged down the defenders like wolves; the battle resolved into whirlpools of painted figures surging about small groups of desperate whites. Bodies littered the earth. Blood-smeared braves dived into huts, whence shrieks rose above

the din of battle as women and children died beneath the red axes. The men-at-arms, hearing those pitiful cries, abandoned the gate, and in an instant the Picts had burst in and were pouring into the enclosure there also. Huts began to burn.

"Make for the manor!" roared Conan, and a dozen men surged in behind him as he hewed his way through the pack.

Strombanni was at his side, wielding his broadsword like a flail. "We cannot hold the manor," grunted the pirate.

"Why not?" Conan was too busy with his crimson work to spare a glance.

"Because—uh!" A stabbing-spear in a dark hand had sunk deep into the Barachan's back. "Devil eat you, bastard!" Strombanni turned and split the Pict's head to his teeth, then reeled and fell to his knees, blood starting from his lips.

"The manor burns!" he croaked, and died.

Conan cast a swift look about him. The men who had followed him were all down in their blood. The Pict gasping out his life under the Cimmerian's feet was the last of the group which had barred his way. All about him the battle swirled and surged, but for the moment he stood alone. He was not far from the south wall. A few strides and he

could leap to the ledge, swing over, and be gone into the night. But he remembered the two helpless girls in the manor, from which smoke now billowed. He ran toward the manor.

A feathered chief wheeled from the door, lifting a war-ax, and behind the racing Cimmerian lines of fleet braves converged upon him. He did not pause, but a sweeping slash bit through the haft of the chief's ax and a second took off the man's head. An instant later Conan was through the door and had slammed and bolted it against the axes that thudded into the wood.

The great hall was full of drifting wisps of smoke through which he groped, half-blinded. Somewhere a woman was whimpering, little sobs of horror. He emerged from a whorl of smoke and stopped, staring.

The hall was dim and shadowy with drifting smoke. The great silver candelabrum was overturned, the candles extinguished, and the only illumination came from the great fireplace and the wall in which it was set. Somebody or something had raked some of the burning logs out into the room, so that the floor was burning and the wall and roof-beams smoking and smoldering. Limned against that lurid

glare Conan saw a human form doubled bonelessly across a table. The dead face was turned toward him with an expression on it that belonged only to the lowest depths of hell. Conan recognized Count Valenso, and a rasping curse came from his startled lips. The count had paid slowly for all his sins before his death had released him.

But there was something else in the hall. Conan saw it through the drifting smoke—a monstrous black figure, outlined against the hellish glare. That outline was vaguely human, but the shadow thrown on the wall was not human at all.

"Crom!" muttered Conan, paralyzed by the realization that he was confronted by a being against whom his sword was useless. He saw Belesa and Tina crouching in each other's arms at the bottom of the stair.

The black monster reared up, looming gigantic against the flame, great arms spread wide. A dim face leered through the smoke, half-human, demoniac, terrible. Conan glimpsed the close-set horns, the gaping mouth, the peaked ears—it lumbered toward him—and memory awoke with desperation. Great hands were clutching for his throat as he leaped backward.

Near the Cimmerian lay the great overturned candelabrum

once the pride of Korzetta Castle—fifty pounds of massy silver, intricately worked with fingers of gods and heroes. Conan grasped it and heaved it high above his head.

"Silver and fire!" he roared, and hurled the candelabrum with all the power of his iron muscles. Full on the great black breast it crashed, fifty pounds of silver winged with terrific velocity. Not even the black one could stand before such a missile. The demon was carried off its feet and hurled back into the fireplace and the roaring flame within and around it.

A horrible scream shook the hall, the cry of an unearthly thing gripped by earthly death. The mantelpiece cracked and stones showered down from the great chimney, half burying the black writhing limbs at which the flames ate in elemental fury. A burning beam crashed down upon the stones, and the whole heap was enveloped in a roaring burst of fire. Hell seemed to open to reclaim its own—there was a monstrous face in the flames—

Conan dragged his eyes from it, caught up the child under one arm and with the other dragged Belesa to her feet. Through the crackle and snap of the fire sounded the splinter-

ing of the front door under the war-axes.

Conan sighted a door opposite the stair-landing and shoved through it, dragging the dazed Belesa. As they came into the chamber beyond, a crash behind them announced that the roof was falling in the hall. Through a strangling wall of smoke Conan saw an open, outer door on the other side of the chamber. As he lugged his charges through it he saw that it sagged on broken hinges, lock and bolt snapped and splintered as if by some terrific force.

"The devil came in by this door!" Belesa sobbed hysterically. "I saw him—but I did not know—"

They emerged into the compound a few feet from the row of huts that lined the south wall. A Pict was skulking towards the door, eyes red in the firelight, ax raised. Dropping Tina and swinging Belesa away from the blow, Conan snatched out his broadsword and drove it through the chest of the onrushing savage. Then, sweeping both girls off their feet, he ran carrying them toward the south wall.

The compound was full of billowing smoke-clouds that half hid the red work going on there, but the fugitives had been seen. Naked figures, black against

the glare, pranced out of the smoke. They were still yards behind when Conan ducked into the space between the huts and the wall. At the far end of the corridor he saw other howling shapes, running in to cut him off.

Halting, he tossed the two girls, one at a time, bodily onto the parapet and leaped after them. Swinging Belesa over the palisade, he dropped her on to the sand outside and then dropped Tina after her. A thrown ax crashed into a log by his shoulder, and then he too was over the wall gathering up his dazed charges. When the Picts reached the wall the space before the palisade was empty of all except the dead.

VIII

Swords Of Aquilonia

Dawn was tingeing the dim waters old rose as far out across the sea a fleck of white grew out of the mist—a sail hanging suspended in the pearly sky. On a bushy headland Conan the Cimmerian held a ragged cloak over a fire of green wood. As he manipulated the cloak, puffs of smoke rose, hanging in the dawn sky until they dissipated.

Belesa crouched near him, one arm about Tina. She asked:

"Will they see it and understand?"

"They'll see it right enough, and 'tis the code of the sea whereby castaways cry for rescue. They've been hanging off the coast all night, hoping to sight survivors. There's only a half-dozen of them, and none can navigate the craft from here to the Barachas, so they'll be glad of a live captain to ship under."

"Suppose the Picts see the smoke?" She shuddered, glancing back over the misty dunes to where, miles to the north, a column of smoke hung in the still air.

"Not likely. After I hid you in the woods I crept back and saw them dragging barrels of wine and ale out of the storehouse. By this time they'll be too drunk to move. With a hundred men I could wipe out the horde—Crom and Mitra!" he cried suddenly. "That's not the *Red Hand* after all, but a war-galley! What civilized state would send a unit of its fleet hither? Unless somebody would have words with your uncle, in which case they'll need a spae-woman to raise his ghost."

He scowled out to sea in an effort to make out the details of the craft through the mist. The approaching ship was bow-on so that all he could see was a gilded bow-ornament, a small

sail bellying in the faint on-shore breeze, and the bank of oars on each side rising and falling like a single pair.

"Well," said Conan, "at least they're coming to take us off. It would be a long walk back to Zingara. Until we find out who they are and whether they're friendly, say nothing of who I am. I'll think of a proper tale by the time they get here."

He stamped out the fire, handed the cloak back to Belesa, and yawned and stretched. Belesa watched him in wonder. The night of fire and blood and slaughter and the flight through the black woods afterward had left his nerves untouched; he was as calm as if he had spent the night feasting. Bandages torn from the hem of Belesa's gown covered a few minor wounds that he had received fighting without armor.

"Do you think it is dead?" she asked.

"I believe so," he replied without asking to whom she referred. "Silver and fire are both deadly to evil spirits, and he got a bellyful of both."

"How about his master?"

"Thoth-Amon? Gone back to lurk in some Stygian tomb, I suppose. It would never have occurred to the fellow to offer us a ride; these wizards are an unfriendly lot. All of them."

The ship was larger, but some time would yet elapse before it made shore. Conan grimed and resumed the tale he had begun during the night to keep the girl's mind from dwelling on the grim things she had seen in the manor-house.

"So Namedides made me general because of some small successes against the Picts, and then when I'd scattered five times my own number of savages in a battle at Velitrium and broken their confederacy, I was called back to Tarantia for an official triumph. All very tickling to the vanity, riding beside the king while girls scatter rose-petals before you; but then at the banquet the bastard plied me with drugged wine, and I woke up in chains in the Iron Tower awaiting execution."

"Whatever for?"

He shrugged. "How should I know what goes on in what that numb-wit calls his brain? Perhaps some of the other Aquilonian generals, had worked upon his suspicions. Or perhaps he took offense at some of my frank remarks about his policy of spending the royal treasury to adorn Tarantia with gilded statues of himself instead of on the defense of his frontiers.

"However, I had friends with whose aid I was smuggled out of the Iron Tower, given a horse

and a sword, and turned loose. I rode back to Bossonia with the idea of raising a revolt, beginning with my own troops. But when I got there I found my sturdy Bossonians gone, sent to another province, and in their place a brigade of ox-eyed yokels from the Tauran, most of whom had never heard of me. They insisted on trying to arrest me, so I had to split a few skulls in cutting my way out. I swam Thunder River with arrows whizzing past my ears . . . and the rest of the tale you know."

He frowned out toward the approaching ship again. "By Crom, I'd swear yonder ensign bore the leopard of Poitain, if I didn't know it impossible. Come."

He led the girls down to the beach as the chant of the coxswain became audible. With a final heave on the oars the crew drove the galley's bow with a rush up on the sand. As men tumbled off the bow, Conan yelled.

"Publius! Trocero! What in the name of all gods are you doing. . ."

"Conan!" they roared, and closed in on him, pounding his back and wringing his hands. The first was Trocero, Count of Poitain, a broad-shouldered, slim-hipped man who moved with the grace of a panther

despite the gray in his black hair.

"What are you seeking here?" persisted Conan.

"We came for you," said Prospero, the slim elegantly-clad one.

"How did you know where I was?"

The stout bald man addressed as Publius gestured toward another man in the black robe of a priest of Mitra. "Dexitheus found you by his occult arts. He swore you still lived and promised to lead us to you."

The black-robed man bowed gravely. "Your destiny is linked with that of Aquilonia, Conan of Cimmeria," he said. "I am but one small link in the chain of your fate."

"Well, what's this all about?" said Conan. "Crom knows I'm glad to be rescued from this forsaken sand-spit, but why did you come after me?"

Trocero spoke. "We have broken with Namedides, being unable longer to endure his follies and oppressions, and seek a general to lead the forces of revolt. You're our man!"

Conan laughed gustily and stuck his thumbs into his girdle. "It's good to find that there are those who understand true merit. Lead me to the fray, my friends!" He glanced around and his eyes caught Belesa, standing timidly apart from the

group. He gestured her forward with rough gallantry. "Gentlemen, the Lady Belesa of Korzetta." Then he spoke to the girl in her own language again. "We can take you back to Zingara, but what will you do then?"

She shook her head helplessly. "I have neither fortune nor friends, and I am not trained to earn my living. Perhaps it would have been better had one of those arrows pierced my heart."

"Not so, my lady!" begged Tina. "I'll work for us both!"

Conan drew a small leather bag from his girdle. "I didn't get all of Maatneb's jewels," he rumbled. He spilled a handful of flaming rubies into his palm, showed them to Belesa, then dumped them back into the bag and handed the bag to the girl. "But these should prove ample for your needs."

"But I cannot take these—" she began.

"Of course you shall take them! I might as well leave you here for the Picts to take your head as leave you in Zingara to starve. I know what it is to be penniless in a Hyborian land. In my country people go hungry only when there's no food at all, but in civilized countries I've seen folk dying of hunger against the walls of storehouses crammed with victuals. So take these gems, sell them, and buy

a castle and slaves and fine clothes. Then you'll easily get a husband, for civilized men all desire wives with these possessions."

"But what of you?"

Conan grinned and indicated the circle of Aquilonians. "Here is my fortune. With these true friends I shall have all the wealth in Aquilonia at my feet."

The stout Publius spoke up. "Your generosity does you credit, Conan, but I wish you had consulted with me first. For revolutions are made not only by wrongs, but also by gold; and Nemedides's publicans have so beggared Aquilonia that we shall be hard put to find the money to hire mercenaries."

"Ha!" laughed Conan. "I'll get

you gold enough to set every blade in Aquilonia swinging!" In a few words he told of the treasure of Tranicos and of the destruction of Valenso's settlement. "Now the demon's gone from the cave, released by Thoth-Amon and slain by me; the Picts will be scattering to their villages. With a detail of well-armed men we can make a quick march to the cavern and back before they realize we're in Pictland. Are you with me?"

They cheered until Belesa feared their noise would draw the attention of the Picts. Conan cast her a sly grin and muttered in Zingaran, under the cover of the racket:

"How d'you like 'King Conan'? Sounds not bad, eh?"

Fans of Conan and those who have never read the stories should be happy to learn that the best of Robert E. Howard's stories will now be available in hard covers. Two volumes are already on sale, and more are coming, to make the whole Conan series available. The first of these books, *CONAN THE CONQUEROR* (\$2.75, Gnome Press, New York), contains some of the finest writing Howard ever did. It's a story of Conan as ruler of the kingdom of Aquilonia, beset by every conceivable form of wizardry from the ancient tombs of Stygia. It's also a story of gorgeous battle and terrific conflicts, with a steady pace that makes it impossible to put the book down, once you start. The second volume, *THE SWORD OF CONAN* (\$2.75, Gnome Press) contains two short novels and two long novelettes, and deals with the adventures of Conan as a wandering fighter around the Southern and Eastern lands of this fabulous age. *The People of the Black Circle*, *The Slithering Shadow*, *The Pool of the Black One*, and *Red Nails* are stories that make the book a must. Both volumes are heartily recommended for anyone who enjoys a good, rousing adventure story with excellent fantasy as a bonus. Don't miss them.